

GROW IN GRACE

NEWSLETTER

Volume 39, No.51, December 17, 2013 / Southside Baptist Church & Christian School / P.O. Box 1594 / 1028 South Water Avenue, Gallatin, TN 37066 (615) 452-5951 / **The Grow in Grace Newsletter**— a weekly Bible Study, plus news notes— designed first and foremost for members and those attending services at Southside Church... sent forth to aid one and all, (including friends far and wide who receive the Newsletter), in the experience of 2 Peter 3:18. *"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our LORD and Saviour JESUS CHRIST. To Him be glory both now and forever. Amen."*

The BATTLE for Jesus to be 'CENTER STAGE' in Worship and Life!

It seems that there is always someone or something seeking to have FIRST PLACE in the hearts of Christians— someone/something other than the LORD JESUS CHRIST. Presently the annual Christmas season is revved up with cultural, work-related, school-related, family, and religious activities all demanding FIRST PLACE in our hearts and first place of our time and resources. IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL, genuine Christians have a sincere desire to truly honor Jesus Christ! **ALERT:** We have a great tool to help us win this battle for we confess the Bible as our sole authority and guide for doctrine and practice. Doubtless we are among those who embrace Martin Luther's confession— made when he was asked to deny the Bible and to submit to the Roman Catholic Church and her pope. At that time, Luther proclaimed:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), **I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God:** I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience. **Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen."** (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. VII, ch. 3, sec. 55) MOREOVER, LUTHER FAMOUSLY STATED: "Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving; my warrant is the Word of God— naught else is worth believing. Though all my heart should feel condemned for want of some sweet token, There is One greater than my heart Whose Word cannot be broken. **I'll trust in God's unchanging Word till soul and body severs, for, though all things shall pass away, HIS WORD SHALL STAND FOREVER!"**

That's a powerful, good, and wise **CONFESSION!** Even so, time and time again over the years of Church history, majority voices in visible churches have denied such confessions, persecuted, and even killed multitudes who kept on holding to simple and Biblical faith like Martin Luther's. **Let each of us ask: 'WHERE DO I REALLY STAND?'**

In reality, many of us are Double-Minded. We agree with, confess, and seek to apply such confessions while at the same time embracing the demands of modern culture and religion. **This is understandable for there is much in the world that is flesh appealing and EASY TO LOVE!** It does not have to be wicked stuff! It is often legitimate! As a result, there are many religious and/or cultural traditions upon which we place more value and heart than we do on the will of God as revealed in the Word of God.

When Jesus was on earth, the Jewish religious people were doing some good things, which Jesus said that they should not leave undone. Their deep rooted problem was that they were missing the primary things! (Matthew 23:23) **What about us? WHEN WE ARE CHALLENGED** as to our plans and traditions, at times we protest, "What's wrong with it? I don't see anything wrong with it!" **Here is what's usually wrong:** 'THESE THINGS' have stolen my heart, moved me to misplace my affections, have led me to wrong priorities, and/or have caused me to miss JESUS CHRIST as the Preeminent One! **The cares of this life CHOKE!!** (Matthew 13:22) **MOREOVER, I cannot serve two masters equally!** (Matthew 6:24) Thus, I need to ask, **"In December— what, who is preeminent in my life?"**

Here are examples of reality for far too many:

Example ONE: I recall an experience in Internet conversation. All those involved were professing, and likely sincere Christians. Below, each person is only identified by a 'number' and the conversation is given without correction to wording, grammar, etc:

1. "152 days until Christmas! Love the holidays... it's the days leading up to it with madness... and then it's wintertime... sigh."
2. "I can't even think about that right now. It seems that I have so many other things to get through first."
3. "I always wonder why all kids programs are scheduled then?? Why music recitals etc with everything else we have to do?"
4. "EXACTLY!!!"
5. "I wish it was just a relaxing time when we could enjoy OURSELVES WITH OUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS, and not just a time of negative financial impact and stress!"
6. "So, let's start now... I feel better already! FAMILY, FOOD, FUN... period."

DID YOU NOTICE? In their comments there was not even one word about JESUS! Then, one more person joined the conversation, stating,

7. "Amazing: The New Testament Christians did not have, did not celebrate Christmas in any shape, form or fashion. THEY DID rejoice in and celebrate the glorious reality that GOD

HAD COME IN THE FLESH! Their rejoicing was not on a 'day'... but in their LIFESTYLE... For example: Paul has been teaching about Elders and Deacons in First Timothy 3:1-15... and then he JUST EXPLODES with spontaneous worship: *"And without controversy GREAT is the mystery of godliness: GOD WAS MANIFEST in the flesh.... etc.!!!"* OR... as in 2 Corinthians 9:1-14, PAUL has been speaking much about generous giving.... but suddenly, he BURSTS FORTH: *"THANKS BE TO GOD for His UNSPEAKABLE GIFT!"*

SO... #7 brings JESUS CHRIST to the forefront of this discussion among Christians. WHY NOT? For these six would have led the 'choir' in proclaiming, '**JESUS is the reason for the season!**' **Three of them responded to #7's** having brought the Word of God and the example of New Testament Christians into the discussion. **Their responses:**

1. **"Oh no let's not talk about that!!!!"**
2. **"Dislike."**
3. **"Ugh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"** (That's an 'ugh' with 14 exclamation points!)

And then, there was silence... total stunning silence.

QUESTION: Are there places, situations, people, loves, traditions, etc... where JESUS IS OFF LIMITS in my life... where I am not interested in His good pleasure?

Example TWO: The findings below are edited from a 2010 Southern Baptist LifeWay Research survey, by Brooklyn Lowery: **LifeWay Research** reveals that nine in 10 Americans (91 percent) personally celebrate Christmas... A majority of agnostics or those claiming no preference (89 percent), individuals claiming other religions (62 percent), and even atheists (55 percent) celebrate Christmas along with 97 percent of Christians.

1. **81 percent of all Americans put family first at Christmas**, agreeing, strongly or somewhat, with the statement, *"Family traditions are the most important part of Christmas to me."* Americans celebrate the Christmas holiday... but for most, **family is the reason for the season.**

At Christmas, giving gifts to family members is the most common activity at **89 percent**. Additionally, more than three out of four households report they gather with family or friends for a Christmas meal (86 percent), put up a Christmas tree (80 percent), listen to Christmas music (79 percent), and decorate their homes (77 percent).

Christians are actually among the most likely to enjoy elements of the Christmas season not related to Jesus' birth, with 66 percent saying they watch fictional Christmas movies,

as compared to half of agnostics or those with no preference, and less than half of atheists and Americans of other religions...

Overall, a little more than one-third of all households (38 percent) encourage belief in Santa, compared to **42 percent of Christian households**. Again, overall, 38 percent of Americans encourage belief in Santa Claus; **only 28 percent** read or tell the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus.

CONCLUSION OF THE SURVEY: "Americans give Jesus a head nod at Christmas but spend most of the season pleasing their eyes, ears, and taste buds with decorations, music, and meals," "Many celebrate Christmas the way most have celebrated Halloween -- the fun traditions without sharing the religious significance." **REALITY:** Matthew 6:24 is actually true— **No one can serve two masters!**

EXAMPLE THREE: Here is a true story of Christian religious sincerity in action. Those involved did a lot of OK or even GOOD things. Even so, unrealized, something was missing! **At the first of the month, every December at Jewell Baptist Church preparations would begin in earnest for the annual Christmas pageant/drama.** In the front of the church auditorium there was always a huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree. The entire church 'exchanged names.' **The Methodists**, (just across the road), always joined us for this special evening; and they did likewise amongst themselves! Thus, on the night of the pageant everyone brought gifts and placed them under the giant tree. On this annual most wonderful night of the year the church building was always full and **every child was filled with hope and excitement about what might be under the tree with their name on it!**

The annual Christmas Pageant and gift exchange always followed the same order. After a few carols were sung, the drama presentation would commence. The drama was always directed by a fine Methodist lady; and on the big night parents beamed with pride as their children acted out what was called 'the Christmas Story.' After the drama **the main event of the evening** would take place. No, No, of course not— we never called it the 'main event' or anything like that! However, truth requires one to report that **it was obvious to all where lay the evening's greatest delight, joy, and excitement!**

Following the drama, before a single present could be moved from under the giant Christmas tree, **one of the church deacons would give the annual 'Jesus is the reason for the season' speech!** It was dutifully emphasized that the evening was "all about giving and not about getting!" [When those lectures came, we would agree on the outside; but inside our hearts, we knew different! After the last "Amen" of the evening, none of us ran up to each other and asked, "What did you give?" No, it was, "What did you get?" "Show and Tell" was in full swing!] **Yes, the deacon would always stress 'why the tree and the mountain of presents were not the main event!' But his words, sincere as they were, could never**

overpower the reality of **the giant tree and the mountain of glistening gifts, all begging to be opened!** With duty done, the deacon would look out over the auditorium and choose several of the youth for the much treasured assignment of delivering the gifts!

One or more of the deacons would pick up gifts, loudly call out names and the youth would speedily deliver the gifts to the proper folks in the auditorium. Within moments, the sound of packages being opened filled the air, even as more names were called out and more presents were delivered. **Yes, in the hearts of us children, (and not a few adults!) it was the most wonderful night of the year— the pinnacle of the evening was taking place** and would continue until every present had been distributed and opened! Then, we all quieted down for the closing words and prayer, which always dutifully reminded us yet again, ***"Jesus is the reason for the season!"***

LOOKING BACK: Every December our pastors preached sermons, Sunday School lessons were taught, the congregation sang Carols, we went Caroling, the deacons exhorted, and everyone was sincere— **but honesty requires one to confess that year after year the intended impact of all those sermons, exhortations, singing, and good deeds to the poor were soon lost or never received because the eyes and hearts of children and adults were on a beautiful Christmas tree and a mountain of presents!**

Example FOUR: A revealing testimony from a church member about their 'Singing' Christmas tree:

"...This year was especially momentous because of some special guests from the world of theatrical productions. **Some cast and crew members from the touring company of the Broadway production *The Lion King* watched the Monday evening performance of the *Singing Christmas Tree*.** Many repeat guests declared the performance "the best ever!" and first-time guests gave glowing praises, but some of the most meaningful comments came from the Broadway professionals themselves.

COMPARED TO ONLY 53 involved in *The Lion King*, the cast [*The Lion King* cast] was **amazed to learn** that more than 1,200 volunteers participated on stage or behind the scenes in the... production of the *Singing Christmas Tree*, with as many as 350 performers on stage in some of the major scenes. **Impressed with the quality and professionalism of every part of the production, they said, "We've been in theatres all across the country and we've never seen anything like this!**

REALITY! Not only was Jesus NOT CENTER STAGE— once again, He did not even get an honorable mention! The testimony is all about PRIDE in performance.

HARD TO FACE REALITY: Every December Bible-believing churches, big and small, spend much time and money to produce performances relating to the birth of Messiah.

The multitudes sit, listen, enjoy, and leave talking about how good the performance was... in similar fashion as the above testimony— unmoved and untouched as to why Jesus came!

Back at Jewell Baptist, when the day was done, who/what was 'Center Stage?' Year after year we left ignorant of and unmoved as to the MANY REASONS why Jesus came!

None of us - young or old - could ever bring ourselves to face and confess the truth! The truth was that on those most wonderful nights of the annual Christmas Pageant and gift exchange the tree and the presents were center stage— not a Saviour from sin!

We never experienced spontaneous and overflowing joy and rejoicing about a Saviour from sin! **No one ever stood up at the conclusion of 'the most wonderful night of the year' and shouted out or even quietly spoke anything like this:**

"And the Word (Jesus) became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable Gift." (2 Cor. 9:15)

"...Jesus Christ: Who being in the form of God,...took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men...he humbled Himself ...unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:1-11) "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: GOD WAS MANIFEST IN THE FLESH....." (1 Tim. 3:16) "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." (1 Timothy 1:15)

No one ever stood up at the conclusion of 'the most wonderful night of the year' and testified anything like this:

"God came in the flesh to save undeserving rebels (That's us!) from the just and eternal wrath of God in hell! **He came to set rebels free from self, sin and satan. He gives us new hearts and makes us His own sons and daughters; and makes us His servants, His friends, His saints and His co-laborers! JOY! WONDER! Giving Thanks! Praising and CELEBRATING Jesus Christ! TELLING THE GOOD NEWS to the whole world till He comes back— these are proper responses from those who have been rescued from sin, self, satan, and a doomed society! — "O Come, let US adore HIM!"**

BOTTOM LINE REALITY: To win the battle for Jesus to be 'CENTER STAGE' in worship

and in life — especially during the Decembers of my life —

I will have to BELIEVE the Word of God— I cannot serve two masters. **I will find great POSITIVE** help from following the examples of those who first welcomed the birth of Christ. And as painful as it may be, **I will have to be honest about and alert to the dangers of and the presence of double mindedness.**

AS AN OVERFLOW OF DELIGHTING in JESUS CHRIST our LORD—

Let it also be seen in setting aside

EXTRA LOVE OFFERINGS for the work and ministry of
MISSIONARIES AROUND THE WORLD!

Jesus left heaven and came to earth on the **GREATEST**,
most costly missionary journey of all time— to save sinners!

In Christ we have the high calling of God in Christ Jesus to LIVE and TAKE
the gospel to the world, from Gallatin/Sumner County to the ends of the
earth. LET US PRAY and GIVE for the furtherance of the Gospel!

HALLELUJAH! WHAT A SAVIOR! Grace to all! James Bell