

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

This is Pastor Wayne Mueller. The following is the Message from the Master sermon broadcast December 23, 2007. The sermon theme is "Commercialism—The King of Christmas" based on Psalm 2. (Part of series, "Little Psalms for Big Problems")

Our fast-paced world is about to hit a speed bump. For 364 days out of every year the world is totally wrapped up in itself. There is military maneuvering, political posturing, commercial competition, keeping up with the Joneses, feverish shopping deadlines and waiting lines, stock market volatility, mad commuting schedules, media frenzy, blatant materialism, glitterati, sports mania, paparazzi, political correctness gone extreme, Freedom from Religion propaganda, posting of terrorist activity, pork barrel legislation, investigative committees, high profile criminal trials, strikes and boycotts, lawsuits and countersuits.

But in a couple of days all this comes to a screeching halt. The busy world will hit the brakes, because this day belongs to God. A world totally wrapped up in will grind to a halt for a whole day to hear what God wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

Christmas Day is God's day of reckoning. For all those store clerks who breezed through the last months with their generic "Happy Holiday," all those stationery suppliers who could find nothing but snowmen and Santa Clauses to put on their wrapping paper, all those businesses who sold "Family Trees" instead of Christmas trees, all the endless media drivel that this season is about family and giving—all that will stop. It will be Christmas. Not a holiday, but a holy day, the birth of Jesus; not X-mas, CHRIST-mas, the celebration of Christ; not distinguished by our little gifts to each other or even our family gatherings, but exalted by the message of God's great gift that made us all members of his family.

Like most crabby old preachers, I used to get really up tight about the all the commercialism surrounding Christmas. All this business of buying stuff, wrapping stuff, giving and getting stuff clearly distracted from what God did and said when he put his little baby boy in a cattle feeder. But then one year I reread Psalm 2. I read it carefully. Now I have a different perspective. Psalm 2 reminds us that the nabobs of this world will always militate against God and his Son. They will always expend their energy and resources to undo what God is doing. They will specifically target God's Son and try to lay waste to his kingdom. But Psalm 2 reminds us of the vanity of all such attempts. Psalm 2 says God has installed his King, Jesus, as the head of his church, and, as Jesus himself said, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Jesus is, and will always be, the King of Christmas.

Psalm 2 begins by describing in poetic fashion the natural rage and the conscious opposition that the movers and shakers of this world pose to God and his Christmas King. "Why do the nations rage," the psalmist asks, "and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters'" (Psalm 2:1-3).

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I now have the attitude of the psalmist in regard to all the opposition to Christianity, including the extreme commercializing of the season. Listen to how the psalmist begins, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" Sure, we can expect opposition to a radical message that proclaims we are saved not by our own efforts, but alone by the grace of God shown us in his Son. The world lives by its own mantra of self-reliance. Pagans always want to do their own thing; they want to have it their way; and if there is any fixing or saving to do, they want to do it themselves.

But the emptiness of this world's opposition is evident from the fact that it cannot win. All opposition to God and his message of amazing grace is mortal. It dies; it loses power, it goes off the scene; even at its strongest, it must stop in its tracks once a year to listen as the planet quietly proclaims the birth of God's King. The world's slogan of self-reliance is discredited by its own eventual demise. God always wins in the end. No matter what short term gains the opposition makes in battle, God always wins the war. "Why do the nations rage?!!!" the psalmist asks in near disbelief. Why do they even try to fight against God? Don't they know all their opposition to God will be wasted?

The world listens to God's message of peace on earth at Christmastime like a self-absorbed husband listens to his wife. The husband is so busy doing his own thing or getting ready to do his own thing that he doesn't really hear what his wife is saying. In spite of the biblical clarity of God's message of freedom from sins, peace with God, a conscience at rest, the unbelieving world persists in caricaturing of the Christian message as a ball and chain. The psalmist paraphrases the constant cry of anti-Christian efforts in verse 3: "'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.'"

The world perverts the gospel of Jesus Christ by reframing it in its own way of thinking. Unbelievers are devoted to saving themselves. They must pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. If they are going to get ahead, they must work hard, plan carefully, and put their own good before the good of others. There are rules to follow, schedules to

conform to, tricks of the trade, pitfalls to avoid. They are reared and raised on repetitive mottoes like, Give it the old college try, The indomitable human spirit, Win one for the Gipper, Hang in there, You go girl!, and Never give up.

Then along comes God with his message of Jesus, the Christmas King. He does not ride into town on Lipizzaners or Clydesdales. He does not step out of a limousine wearing a Rolex. The Son of God from all eternity, by whom the world was created, reenters his world as a little human baby and is placed in the feed box of a cattle barn, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of poor parents. He comes with a radical message that blows away the self-absorbed world when he says, "This is not about me; I came to save you."

St. Paul captures the radical nature of the Christian gospel when he writes, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:20-23). What stuns the unbeliever is the total unselfishness of God in offering his Son to an undeserving world and distributing his blessings by free grace.

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How in the world can anti-religious and anti-Christian groups consider such a liberating Christmas message to be restrictive and confining? Why do they oppose it and take such offense to it? Why do they constantly talk about ridding themselves of the fetters and chains of Christianity? That's simple. The message of the baby Jesus is totally unselfish and it is totally free. To the unbeliever that is counterintuitive. It seems like nonsense. In the commercial, capitalist world, nothing is for nothing; there is no free lunch, you only get what you pay for. So, even when God says, I am coming to save you and my love is free, the unbeliever sings on like Frank Sinatra, insisting on doing it his own way. Patiently, lovingly God responds in the inspired Scripture: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

I think Christians should back off their aggressive opposition to the commercialism of Christmas and adopt instead the attitude God displays in Psalm 2. Listen to how God responds to those who oppose his Christmas King: The psalmist writes, "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill' (Psalm 2:4-6).

If God himself laughs off the vain opposition to Jesus and his message, why should we get all upset about it? When Psalm 2 says that God installed his King on Zion, the New Testament explains that as God's making Jesus the Head of his Holy Christian Church.

“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” Jesus said in his parting words. That means nobody no thing will be able successfully to oppose him.

This confidence you and I can live with, not only on Christmas but every day of the year. Think about it: every antagonist of Christianity, both philosophical and political; everybody who predicted the demise of the Christian faith or worked for its downfall the past two thousand years is rotting in his grave. And still the message of the gospel is heard throughout the world. And, you and I get to celebrate the Christmas King, Jesus, one more time in a couple of days.

The Bible says God makes evil turn out for his own eventual good. That’s what we need to remember as we prepare for Christmas. Lets’ not waste our time worrying or complaining about the eventually futile attempts of materialism to displace Jesus. It’s not going to happen. Instead, let us use the many material blessings God gives us to celebrate our Christmas King. Let us give and receive every gift as a reflection of the great gift God gave us when he sent his Son. Let’s make sure at every gathering the nativity story is told in the words of Scripture and in the symbolism in our decorations. Let our lights shine with the glory of him who is the light of the world. Let our bells ring for the joy that is ours through the forgiveness of sins. Let our tinsel shimmer with the righteousness God’s King came to win for us. And throughout the year, let our confidence that Jesus is still on the throne be evident in our trust, regardless of the situation, that a loving God is still in control.

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Although the Christian’s final victory does not come until he falls asleep in the arms of Jesus, there are many indications already now that the good news of Jesus prevails. One measure of that is the enduring quality of the Christmas King’s message. It does not go away after a one-day display. We will celebrate the love of God in Christ Jesus throughout the coming years in regular worship and praise. Most people can’t remember the material gift they got last Christmas, but the blessings we enjoy from the hand of God through the birth of his son are embedded in the memories of the faithful.

Just as enduring are the consequences of God’s good news in our lives. Christians may give gifts at Christmas, but their giving neither starts nor stops on this one day of the year. Our prayers rise to God daily for the growth of the church, for the comfort of the poor and needy, for compassion on the persecuted and suffering, for the undiluted purity of God’s message of amazing grace, for their daily bread, and for their deliverance from evil. The gifts we bring at Christmas are but a shadow of the value of

the gifts Christians bring in support of their church and missions, for charities and hospitals, for their community and neighborhoods.

God has installed his King, the baby Jesus on his holy hill, the Holy Christian Church. God give us the confidence of Psalm 2 that from there Jesus rules our lives with his grace and power. Materialism and anti-Christian sentiment may speak loudly proudly, but the message of Jesus we carry to the world is stronger and lasts longer. Let's celebrate Christmas with confidence that the joy is ours already now and the victory will be ours forever. No matter how many pretenders there are to the throne, Jesus is still the King of Christmas. Amen.

PRAYER

Thank you, heavenly Father, for sending your Son, Jesus on that first Christmas to be our Savior from sin. May his humble manger and his holy life remind us of the deep love that sent him, and the blessed results of his ministry. By your powerful Spirit, deepen our faith, renew our confidence in your gracious guidance of our lives and your powerful preservation of your Church. Open our lips to sing your praise this Christmas, and bless us to proclaim Jesus King throughout the new year. We also pray in his name as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and ever. Amen.**