

# The Mess That Christmas Makes

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## Introduction

### What I Don't Mean

- A. The title of the message for this morning is The Mess That Christmas Makes. As I was crafting this title, I wondered how you would take it, what you would think I meant by it. Let me just be clear about not talking about here.
1. I'm not talking about the mess that Christmas makes of your living room. On Christmas morning, with all the wrapping paper and boxes, toys and trinkets. My living room is going to look like a toy store just dropped a bomb in it and it's probably going to take me to the new year just to get things back in order.
  2. I'm not talking about the mess that Christmas makes of your schedule. Does anybody else feel like they just can't catch their breath during the holiday season? You've got gifts to buy, parties to attend, lights to put up, decorations to put out, cookies to bake, etc. I was up late numerous nights the past couple of weeks trying to put together one of those photo books for printing and distributing to the grandparents and what not. It's fun, but it's exhausting. And, on top of this, I've got two kids with birthdays in December as well. So the month is just complete madness. Megan and I both agree we have to start planning for December back in like August or something. Christmas makes a mess of our schedules.
  3. I'm not talking about the mess that Christmas makes of our budget. I don't even want to look at what's going on in my bank account right now. I think I'm just going to wait until the smoke of the holidays clear and we'll assess the damage sometime after that.

### What I Do Mean

- A. But again, none of this is what I'm referring to with this title. When I'm talking about The Mess That Christmas Makes I'm talking about the mess that the arrival of Jesus makes in the world in general and in our lives in particular.
1. I don't know if you've noticed this, but if you look closely at the biblical narrative and the Christmas story, you'll see that the birth of Jesus makes a serious mess of things. Chaos just starts spinning out from around Bethlehem.
- B. The popular notion concerning Christmas it seems to me is that everything was just peaceful. We tend to think of it as this quiet, serene time when Jesus was born. It's this heartwarming pastoral scene nestled in the hills of Bethlehem. There's a star twinkling up above. The little sheep and the cattle are cuddling up with each other. Baby Jesus is so perfect when He comes out He doesn't even cry, not even a whimper. There's like this little halo softly glowing over his little head. The angels are holding hands and singing and swaying back and forth with the music. All is right with the world.

1. We get these ideas from some of our carols, right? “*Silent night, holy night / All is calm, all is bright / Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child / Holy infant so tender and mild / Sleep in heavenly peace / Sleep in heavenly peace.*” Just sleep, just relax, just rest. All is right.
- C. And, of course, we should know that there is certainly truth to this. Jesus has ultimately come to make things right, to bring us back to God and give us everlasting peace and joy. But the process of getting there isn’t quite like the carol describes. It’s chaos. It’s a mess.
1. There’s no room for them in the inn, so they’re out back with the animals.
  2. The only people God could seem to get on the invite list for His Son’s birthday party were some grungy shepherds and (a little while later) a few Gentile mystics.
  3. Everyone else seems to want to kill Him. People around this whole event starting to fume. The Magi have to slip secretly away just to keep their heads. Joseph and Mary are on the run. Babies are being slaughtered.
  4. People back home are starting whisper-campaigns about what looked to them like Mary’s infidelity, Joseph’s cowardice in not doing anything about it, and Jesus Himself is being labeled as some sort of a bastard child. “Joseph and Mary were betrothed, of course, but I saw her belly getting big long before the wedding night, didn’t you?”
- D. It’s a mess! And, while there are many things that Christmas, the arrival of Jesus, makes a mess of here, I want to bring out just two for us to consider this morning: (1) Christmas Makes a Mess of Our Secular Ambitions; and (2) Christmas Makes a Mess of Our Religious Facades.

## (1) Christmas Makes a Mess of Our Secular Ambitions

- A. All of us in one way or another have, what I would call, these secular ambitions. These are ambitions that don’t originate from God, and don’t really have anything to do with God. They just kind of orbit around the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. I’ve got this vision, this plan, these ambitions for my life.
1. Maybe you want that house on the hill. Maybe you want that girl down the street. Maybe you want that job with that company. Whatever it is, you have these ambitions.
    - a. And now what I’m saying here is that Christmas—the arrival of Jesus Christ, whether in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago, or in your life here this morning—is going to make a mess of that stuff real quick.
- B. For this, let me introduce you to Herod the Great—the man who was appointed by Rome as king of the Jews there in Judea. [Matt 1](#), Jesus is born. [Matt 2](#), now, we meet Herod the Great, and we see how the arrival of Jesus affects him: “<sup>1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was [what?] troubled . . .” (vv. 1–3a). Not overjoyed, not excited, not relieved . . . “troubled”. Why?
1. Well, you see it accented even in those verses don’t you? There is a clash of kings going on here. “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” . . . When Herod the king [of the

Jews] [heard this, he was troubled . . .](#)” There are two kings here. That’s the problem. Herod had his own political aspirations and the birth of Jesus is a threat to that.

- a. So the chapter continues and by the end of it we read that he’s sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the male children two years and younger ([v. 16](#)). Christmas is making a mess for Herod.
- C. And it will do the same for us. There may be areas of your life even right now that you don’t want to surrender. You still want to rule and reign there. You still want to be king over your finances, over your sex life, over your whatever.
1. You might give Jesus a little bit from the margins, but if Jesus is really going to come in in a saving way, He’s got to have all of it. He has to be, not just your Savior, but your Lord. And that’s going to mess up some of your ambitions.
    - a. The arrival of Jesus in space and time is a threat to my autonomy, my self-rule, my plans. Christmas is making a mess of things for me.

## (2) Christmas Makes a Mess of Our Religious Facades

- A. Christmas is not only a threat to the secular person, it’s a threat to the religious as well.
- B. Because we are all created in the image of God, because the law of God is in some way written on our hearts (cf. [Rom 2:15](#)), we all have this innate sense that we ought to be morally good, right. So we are constantly trying to reassure ourselves that we are—whether by doing some good deeds to make up for some of the bad, or comparing ourselves with that guy over there who is clearly much worse, and so forth. We need to feel morally okay.
1. That’s why we so often rationalize and justify our sin. We don’t just own it. If we do things we know are wrong, we blame others for it. “It’s my dad’s fault, that’s why I drink like I do. I learned it from him.” When the guy commits adultery: “My wife made me do it. She’s shown no interest in me for months. Then when my secretary seemed to think I was special, I mean c’mon. it’s not my fault.”
    - a. We feel the need to do this because deep down we know we should be better than we are, we need to be right.
- C. One of the ways we try to reassure ourselves that we are good is actually by participating in religion. We engage in certain religious practices or activities, and we feel better about ourselves. And we look better to others too.
1. This is what I’m referring to with this idea of “religious facades”. We put something on out here that makes us feel better and look better, but, as we’ll find out here, we’re truly no better than anyone else. In fact, in God’s eyes, we might even be worse.
- D. For this, let me introduce you now to the Pharisees and Sadducees—the religious leaders in Israel at the time when Jesus came on the scene. So we continue. [Matt 1](#), Jesus is born. [Matt 2](#), we see that

this makes a mess of Herod's secular ambitions. And now, in [Matt 3](#), we see that this also makes a mess of the religious facades of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

- E. John the Baptist, commissioned by God to prepare the way of the Lord, is calling for repentance in Israel: [“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” \(v. 2\)](#). And people were coming to him, confessing their sins, and being baptized in the Jordan river. Word of his ministry reaches the religious elite in Israel. And they come out to see what all this is about. And then we read this in [Matt 3:7-12](#): [“<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.<sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.<sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”](#)”
1. Did you catch that? Jesus' arrival is a massive threat to the religious leaders of His day. This would have floored any God-fearing Jew within earshot. From the Jewish perspective, you couldn't get any more holy than these guys. Especially the Pharisees, we know that they were absolutely meticulous in their keeping of the law, working through it with a fine-tooth comb.
    - a. And yet, John here identifies them as a [“brood of vipers”](#) and he calls the to repent and bear true fruit for God lest Jesus show up, cut them down, and throw them into the fire.
- F. But why these harsh words? What's the point here? Well, the point I think is that, when Jesus shows up, He sees through the religious game, the religious facade.
1. He knows there are many reasons a person might have for going to church, for saying their prayers, for doing good deeds, or whatever. Some do such things in genuine love for God and neighbor, but others (i.e. the Pharisees and Sadducees) do such things in love for self. It feels good to see yourself and be seen by others as righteous, as good.
- G. And now these guys are being uncovered, they're being exposed. They're not being seen as righteous anymore, but as vipers. Jesus won't permit them to think they are somehow in a separate category, without need of His grace and redemption. No! [“<sup>23</sup> \[A\]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” \(Rom 3:23–24\)](#). The Pharisee and Sadducee need this just as much as the tax collector and prostitute. He levels the playing field. He lumps them in with the rest of fallen humanity. [“How dare you!”](#)
1. That's why they hate Jesus with such vehemence. That's why they, like Herod, start looking for ways to kill Him from the very beginning. Christmas is making a mess for them.

- H. And it will do the same for us. Christmas confronts our self-righteousness. Christmas says that we are so far off the mark, so helpless in our sin, so unable in and of ourselves to climb our way up to God that He had to come down to us.
1. It's as Tolu said a couple of weeks ago. It stood out to me because it was a bit shocking: "Christmas is first an indictment before it is a celebration."
    - a. Is it a celebration? O it is! It's as the angel of the Lord declared to the shepherds: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). And then all the angels join in singing.
    - b. But before it is "good news of great joy", it is a threat to our self-righteousness and our religious facades. It says there is sin and brokenness in here that I can't fix on my own. I need help from outside.
- I. So Christmas is going to confront us. Jesus doesn't set aside His glory and come down to high-five humanity because we're just that awesome. He comes down to die for humanity because that's what we deserve from a holy God for our sin and He's desperate to keep us from it.
1. Jesus isn't going to let us play church. God is not impressed with our religious games. Other people might be, but not Him. He doesn't care about our church attendance, our good deeds, our eloquent prayers if He doesn't have our hearts. He's going to go at that, at the deepest places of our depravity. And that's going to mess up our self-image, our self-esteem.
    - a. The first step in AA and NA is this: "I have a problem and I need help." If you don't get there, you don't get anywhere. But still it's so hard to say.

## Conclusion

### Why the Mess?

- A. And I suppose this really takes us now to the last thing I want to consider before we close. Certainly, we need to ask the question: Why is Jesus making a mess? Why does He have to be causing such a stir, creating such problems? What is He after in all of this? Is He just a rebel without a cause or does He have a purpose here?
1. Of course, I just alluded to the answer but the angel speaking to Joseph in [Matt 1:21](#) makes the purpose of His arrival abundantly plain: "[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
    - a. In other words: Whatever mess He's making with stuff out here in our lives, the ultimate goal is to clean us up where we need it most in here. The goal is to bring us back to life, to restore us to God.
      - i. Jesus knows that our secular ambitions and our religious facades are killing us. And He wants to save us and bring us into so much more.

- B. Take Herod's situation again for example. He so desperately wanted a throne. And what we know from history is that it was destroying him.
1. Because he was an Edomite (Idumean) and not a Jew, the Jews never accepted him as their legitimate king and that infuriated him and had him in constant fear of conspiracy. So we're told, not only did he kill these babies in Bethlehem, throughout his reign he killed three of his sons, two of his wives, and one of his mothers-in-law all because he thought they were somehow going to make a move on his throne.
    - a. That's the irony, right? We struggle to release certain things to Jesus because these are the things we think will bring us the most joy. But instead it's these very things that end up destroying us.
- C. And Jesus comes in, Christmas comes in, and says: "Let Me have it. I have more for you than this." He makes a mess of our plans but He makes things so much better. It's exhausting trying to make our plans happen. We're not God. No matter how much we want to be king of our lives, we know we can't effectively rule and reign. But Jesus can and we can actually get rest from the madness in Him.
1. "<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.<sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.<sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30). He's a good King. Let Him have it.
- D. When it comes to the Pharisees and Sadducees it's the same sort of thing. While they so badly wanted to see themselves and be seen by others as right, as good . . . Jesus wanted to make them truly right, truly good.
1. Keeping up the facade is exhausting work and it too eventually spirals out into things like jealousy, anger, anxiety, fear. The junk you have, the wrong you've done, you can't pay that back or make up for it with some religious activity. And you know it. You feel it.
- E. The only thing you can do to make that right is take it, with all the guilt and shame that comes along with it, give it to Jesus, and follow Him from Bethlehem to Calvary, from the manger to the cross, where He will pay for it on your behalf with His life.
1. The threat John the Baptist makes to the Pharisees and Sadducees—that they'd be chopped down like fruitless trees and thrown into the fire of God's wrath—that's what Jesus faces for you and for me. That's the meaning of His cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).
    - a. He was baptized in the wrath of God (Luke 12:50) so that, after He's risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, we, though sinful and rebellious and self-righteous and broken, could be baptized with His Spirit and be born again from above, made clean from the inside out. Making a mess of the facade isn't just to expose and embarrass us, it's to heal and restore us.

- F. Certainly my testimony bears this out. Countless testimonies in this church bear this out. Jesus makes a mess of our secular ambitions and our religious facades ultimately to save us from our ourselves and the wrath of God due our sin.
1. I'll never forget . . . for five years I was the pastor of a college ministry in down in San Luis Obispo, and one night after our Friday night gathering, one of the students came up to and said with bright, beaming smile on her face: "Jesus has messed up my life!"
    - a. You come into college thinking you're on this or that track, you've got the five and the ten year plan, you know where you've come from and you know where you're going . . . and then you meet Jesus and everything changes . . . for good!
- G. So I don't know where you are this morning. Maybe you're with Herod going: "Step back, you're getting too close, I will live how I want to live." Maybe you're with the Pharisees and Sadducees saying: "I'm fine, I've got this. I'm a good person. I don't need this grace thing. Christianity is just a crutch. I can walk fine, thank you."
1. Wherever you are, my encouragement for you this Christmas season is this: Give Jesus permission to make a mess of your life. He will only make it better!