

A Christmas Story (Revised from 2004)

Matthew 2: 9-12

12 20 2009 Sam Jones UMC

Introduction

From 1955 to 1977, Jean Shepherd was a familiar personality on WOR radio in New York City. In a style similar to Garrison Keillor, Shepherd sat in front of the microphone and told long, rambling stories about his life. Many of the tales came from his childhood. He often began a story with the words, “*I was this kid see . . .*”

Shepherd published some of his stories in a book entitled In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash! In 1983, the book was made into a movie called *A Christmas Story*. The tagline for the film claimed it was “*A tribute to the original, 100%, red-blooded, two-fisted, all-American Christmas!*”

Peter Billingsley starred in the lead role of **Ralphie**, a young boy growing up in 1940s’ Indiana. On the Christmas of his ninth year, he only wanted ONE thing for Christmas. If he received this one special gift, then he would be forever satisfied.

I. All I Want For Christmas Is . . .

There’s a little bit of **Ralphie** in each of us. We’ve all yearned for a Red Ryder, 200 shot, Carbine Action, Air Rifle . . . or something like it. A doll, bicycle, puppy, kitten, chemistry set, video game console, cell phone, car It was the ONE gift that would fulfill our lives and make us forever happy. And if we got it, then we promised our parents that we would never, ever want anything again! Ever!

When I was nine years old, all I wanted was a brand new **bicycle**. But not just any bicycle. I wanted a low rider bike complete with monkey handlebars and tiger-striped, banana seat. All the cool kids had one. With such a bike, I could race the wind and win while cruising the neighborhood with my envious friends.

It seemed as if December 25th would never come. On Christmas morning, I awoke to find the bike of my dreams waiting under the tree. My life was complete and content! I would never, ever want anything again.

Well, at least for the time being. But after a while, the new slowly began to wear off. Much to my surprise, I discovered that it *was* indeed possible for me to want something else again. And I did! Soon I had moved on to the NEXT thing that I HAD to have.

Someone once said: “*The only difference between men and boys is the size of their toys.*” I would dare say the same sentiment is true for women and girls—it just doesn’t rhyme! A small child still lives in each of our hearts. Despite previous lessons to the contrary, we continue to harbor the sneaking suspicion that somewhere there is someTHING that will satisfy us forever. And we’ll never, ever want anything else again—at least until the next time.

II. Materialism

In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes popularized a philosophy that became known as “**materialism**.” In short, the theory states the physical world that we experience with our five senses is the ONLY reality. Matter matters and nothing else. This rational, empirical approach to the world was the basis for the modern scientific approach. Ironically, Hobbes was the son of a clergyman!

Materialism has a more common definition in our world today. If the physical world is all that matters, then value, purpose, and happiness are only found in material well-being. This leads to a pursuit of worldly riches with little interest in spiritual values. We should invest our lives in material possessions. Only things that can be experienced through sight, taste, touch, smell, and hearing are worthwhile. Materialism leads people to find meaning and happiness through THINGS.

Materialism is a popular philosophy in today’s world. After all, we are living in a material world, and we are material girls and boys. It’s not that we want much, we just want more. Insatiable appetites tempt us to buy more and more stuff.

This philosophy is most apparent during December. The holiday season is dedicated to the gods of consumerism. The secular version of Christmas celebrates materialism on steroids! Our society gorges itself in a feeding frenzy of shopping.

And even when we resist materialism in our own lives, we find ourselves buying family and friends more and more and more. Our society equates more stuff with more happiness; and naturally, we want our loved ones to be happy. So we go right along.

In the process, we mortgage our finances to the future. Little wonder that the debt level in the United States has risen dramatically during the past decades. Expensive gifts that we cannot afford are put on layaway or credit card. We spend the rest of the year catching up. In fact, I recently saw an ad that boasted: “*No payments until 2012!*” Now, is that really a GOOD thing? Yet we’ll buy almost anything to make the season merry and bright for ourselves and others.

This attitude is epitomized in two slogans that appear on bumper stickers and t-shirts. “*The one who dies with the most toys wins!*” “*Santa, I want it all!*”

III. A Bankrupt Philosophy

Materialism is so pervasive in our society. The message of “more” permeates our culture and resonates within our lives. Materialism is genetically engrained in the very fabric of our being.

Since **Adam and Eve** thought happiness could be found by tasting the forbidden fruit, humanity has sought meaning and fulfillment in the physical. It is the childish notion that the NEXT THING will fill the emptiness in our heart and the hole in our soul.

The first man and woman discovered the folly of their attitudes and actions. Far from satisfying their needs, the first taste of the forbidden fruit awakened a sinful desire for more than God’s plenty. We live with the consequences of original sin.

You would think that past experience would teach us. Yet we learn the same lesson over and over again. Nothing ever satisfies. Like eating potato chips, we always want just one more. Whatever we get, however, it is never enough. Even a Red Ryder BB gun will only satisfy a little boy for so long. There is always something else we desire.

And there is always a price to pay. Do you recall in *A Christmas Story* why the mother didn't want to buy a Red Ryder BB gun? It's a refrain heard throughout the movie, "*You'll put your eye out!*" And while Ralphie doesn't quite put his eye out, he does learn that even the best gift of all has unexpected dangers.

Materialism is ultimately a bankrupt philosophy that cannot deliver on its promises. Those who put stock in its message are buying shares of a business going out of business. Nothing in this world lasts.

The reason materialism ultimately fails is that the material world was never designed by God to meet all of our needs. We are psycho-somatic creatures that unite the physical and spiritual, the body and soul. Although the world around us can meet our physical needs, things cannot satisfy our spiritual emptiness.

In the desert, **mirages** appear on the horizon, appearing to be water. But they are an illusion -- a trick of sun, heat and sand. When you see a mirage, you head toward it, moving faster and faster, until finally, you plunge headlong right into it! But all you get is a mouthful of sand.

Advertising is the false spirituality of materialism, promising what it can never deliver. Even the slogans of advertising sound religious, using the language of ultimate concern: Buick, Something to Believe In, Miller Beer -- It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This, GE, We Bring Good Things to Life. Is this not the essence of idolatry -- a misdirected form of worship?

But these promises are an illusion, a mirage that is very dangerous. All of life has been reduced to consumption. We sacrifice our souls for the mirage of glittering images, and all we get is a mouthful of sand. We have run after mirages in the desert and now the desert is in us. (--Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* 168.)

Obviously, we have to pay attention to the material aspects of life. We must work, eat, make or buy clothes, use various kinds of transport, and so on. But that is not material-ism. *Materialism* begins when the material aspects of life eclipse the spiritual.

Jesus gave an illustration of this in *The Sermon on the Mount*, when he spoke about the lilies of the field in relation to our material needs, and He said: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33). In other words, if you get the spiritual side sorted first, material necessities will fall into place as the Lord so orders.

IV. Our Greatest Need

Blaise Pascal was a French scientist and philosopher who lived from 1623 to 1662. Several experiences led to his religious conversion in 1654. He once wrote: "*There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man, which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.*"

There is a “*hole in our soul*” that can only be filled by the Holy Spirit. Nothing else, no thing else, will do. In Christ’s Christmas incarnation, God met us where we are to satisfy the deepest needs of our soul.

“God Knew Our Greatest Need”

(From: For Mine Eyes Have Seen Thy Salvation by Roy Lessin)

*If our greatest need had been information,
God would have sent us an educator.
If our greatest need had been technology,
God would have sent us a scientist.
If our greatest need had been money,
God would have sent us an economist.
If our greatest need had been pleasure,
God would have sent us an entertainer.
But our greatest need was forgiveness,
So God sent us a Savior.*

V. Gifts of the Magi

Today’s Scripture lesson depicts the closing moments of the traditional nativity scene. Matthew recounts the story of the magi: “*wise men from the east*” who come to worship the newborn king of the Jews.

They bring with them gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some authors refer to this offering as the first Christmas gift. However, this is not true. The FIRST gift was given by God in the form of his son: Jesus the Christ.

Jesus Christ is the reason for the season. He is God’s gift of grace and love to the world. Accepting Christ as our Savior and Lord helps us recognize the bankrupt nature of materialism. Nothing in this world can ever fulfill us. Yet in Jesus Christ, we discover forgiveness for our sins, salvation, and the promise of eternal life.

ALL the gifts that we give in turn are a weak imitation of our heavenly Father.
Gift to God.

Gifts to others. The presents we give are but poor excuses for the gift of ourselves.

Conclusion

In *A Christmas Story*, Ralphie falls asleep on Christmas night with his Red Ryder 200 shot, Carbine Action, Air Rifle cradled in his arms. A Happy Christmas has been had by all. But when he awoke the next morning, materialism had no doubt already planted seeds of dissatisfaction and the desire for more in his heart.

The things of this world cannot satisfy the emptiness within. There is a God shaped vacuum in each of our lives. The hole in our soul can only be filled by the Holy Spirit’s presence.

This Christmas I hope you receive and in turn give the greatest gift of all: the gift that God gave us that very first Christmas day.

With Mary, let us say, “I am the Lord’s servant—let it be to me as you have said.” With Joseph, let us respond to God’s call with faithful obedience. With the angels, let us sing alleluias. With the shepherds, let us go and see what God has done. With the wise men, let us kneel before his side.

Amen.