

### “How to Keep the Right Kind of Christmas”

Christmas Day was nine days ago. For many, the excitement of Christmas celebrations have long since worn off. I've seen decorations coming down off of houses and Christmas trees being disposed of or put back into storage. For some, long work vacations or time off of school is quickly coming to an end.

Back during our Christmas services, and again one week ago, we were encouraged to keep Christmas in our hearts. We were encouraged to keep living with the joy of Christmas. Today, on the second and last Sunday of the Christmas season, we are receiving the same sort of encouragement, but in a little different way.

The difference stems from recognizing that when people celebrate Christmas, there are two very different kinds of Christmas that they celebrate. The one, which I will refer to as the right kind of Christmas, is a celebration that recognizes the true meaning of Christmas. It probably means joining with others in worship on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, if not both. It certainly means taking some time to reflect on the fact that Jesus was born as a baby in order to be the world's Savior.

The other kind of Christmas doesn't have that. It pushes Jesus and his saving work out of the way in order to focus on presents and fun and eating and drinking. Now, there's not necessarily anything wrong with presents, fun, eating, or drinking. Those have their place even in the right kind of Christmas that I was talking about. But in the wrong kind of Christmas, these things become the main things, and the really important meaning of Christmas is minimized, if it is there at all. And in many of these sorts of Christmas celebrations, Jesus is not in view at all.

These two very different Christmases reflect two very different reactions to Jesus, reactions that Jesus has received ever since the time of his coming into this world. These different reactions to Jesus are on display in our sermon text, just a few short verses from the Gospel of John.

John chapter seven records how Jesus attended the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. So, yes, this event is taking place well after his birth in Bethlehem, a reminder that we really have very little from the Bible about Jesus' life between birth and adulthood. During the Feast, Jesus was teaching in the Temple. He drew crowds around him as this was a time when many people were in Jerusalem. Some of the people in the crowds were very interested in what Jesus was saying, while others were opposing him. The words of our text record how the people reacted to the things Jesus had said. The last words of our text really sum up the whole thing: **“the people were divided because of Jesus.”**

Let's look at how they were divided. Some said that Jesus was the Christ. Keep in mind that “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” This was a term that was used to refer to a special figure in the Old Testament Scriptures, one who was promised by God. The meaning of the word itself, Christ, is that he was anointed, or appointed for a special work. The people who said that Jesus was the Christ were right. We might wonder whether they really understood all of the implications of that assertion, however. We find many examples in Scripture of people recognizing that Jesus was the Messiah, but not truly understanding what that meant. What it really meant was that Jesus was the one who was promised to be the Savior of the world. Again, whether they realized all the implications of it or not, those who recognized Jesus as the Christ were interested in following him. They trusted the things that he said.

But there were others in the crowd. Some asked whether Jesus was the Prophet. It seems that they may have had in mind some of God's promises regarding the forerunner, John the Baptist. They may have thought that Jesus had a role to play like that in pointing to the Messiah. Others may have confused what the Old Testament Scriptures say. They may have been referring to passages that described the Messiah as a prophet. But these people weren't equating the two. Some thought that Jesus was not the Christ, even though he might be someone very important.

And then there was still another group of people that weren't sure what to think. They said, "well, he can't be the Messiah because he's from Galilee, and the Messiah will be from Bethlehem." They had the right understanding of that part of the Old Testament. We heard in our First Lesson this morning about the promise that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). But they had a faulty understanding of Jesus. Sure, at that time Jesus lived in Galilee. It was where he grew up, but it was not where he was born. We just celebrated the fact that he was born in Bethlehem.

What it boils down to then is that those who missed out on the truth about Jesus either didn't know the Word, the Scriptures, at that time consisting of the Old Testament, or they didn't know Jesus. For us today, these two issues are essentially one issue, because we know Jesus from his Word. And it therefore continues to be important for us to compare the Old Testament and the New, and to recognize the prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus. It is important because these things underscore the central truth of Scripture, that Jesus died for the sins of the world, and that means that he died for my sins.

And things are not much different today. People are still divided about Jesus, not only at Christmas time, but continuously. There are those that fall into the same category as the people who thought Jesus might be the Prophet. They realize that there is something good, something special, about him. They recognize in Jesus a usefulness or a value, but they stop short of the truth, and they underestimate his true worth. For example, Islam teaches that Jesus is a prophet, but nothing more. According to that religion, he is certainly not the Son of God nor the Savior of the world. And many people today think of Jesus as a great teacher or a great example, but they don't really know the truth.

Others question Jesus. They are agnostic if you will. They don't know what to think or to believe about him, and so end up believing nothing at all about him. Perhaps they ask some important questions, but they never really dig deep after the answer to those questions. They are like the people who questioned whether Jesus could be the Messiah if he came from Galilee.

Of course, at times there is also outright opposition. It wasn't included in our text, but John 7 records how some people wanted to seize Jesus right there and arrest him. And it's not hard to find the same attitude today.

The fact that even those who heard Jesus speak directly in the Temple reacted in these negative ways ought to be a warning for us. Think about it. These people would have had opportunity to see his miracles or at least to have heard from those who did. And yet they missed the point. See, this is not simply a logical conclusion that we can make or a decision that we can choose. Our sinful, fallen natures prevent that. Even now, we ought to recognize our own sinful proclivity to turning away from Jesus. We constantly face the temptation to think more of ourselves and less of Jesus. We think we know better how we ought to live than he does, or that we know better how our lives should turn out instead of trusting him to make things work for our good.

The answer to our doubts, our uncertainties, our sinful natures, is to know Jesus through his Word. It is to know him as the little baby at Bethlehem, to know his teaching as an adult, to know his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. It is to know him better and better by reading, re-reading and studying that Word. Through that Word, God strengthens our faith to face temptation and to overcome our own weaknesses. Through that Word, God moves us to fully trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Even if we had the right kind of Christmas, it would mean nothing if we don't continue in God's Word. What's interesting to consider is that even the wrong kind of Christmas, one focused only on family and fun, can make a case for keeping Christmas in our hearts. That would mean to continue to look for the fun and happiness in life, but it would ultimately fall short of what God wants for us, eternal life and salvation. If we view Jesus as anything less than what he truly is, we lose out. Let's keep the right kind of Christmas by keeping in his Word and growing in our faith and knowledge of him as our Lord and Savior.

The Text: John 7:40–43 (NIV84)

<sup>40</sup> On hearing his words, some of the people said, “Surely this man is the Prophet.”

<sup>41</sup> Others said, “He is the Christ.”

Still others asked, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? <sup>42</sup> Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” <sup>43</sup> Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.