

From Humbug to Hallelujah - Breaking Christmas Chains

INTRO: Most of us know the Christmas song that tells us all about how Santa Claus is “making a list and checking it twice; he’s gunna find out who’s naughty or nice.”

- I. Some take this list less seriously
 - A. In fact, some people are proud not to be on Santa’s nice list
 1. I have seen some shirts that say things like, “I’m the reason Santa has a naughty list.”
 2. Or, “Be naughty, save Santa a trip.”
 - B. But I remember being younger, and being rather concerned about being on the nice list
 1. If I remember right, my parents got around the whole, “Santa being omniscient” thing by telling us that Jesus told Santa if we were naughty or nice
 2. And then reassuring us that we were nice kids - Although my sister might have had differing opinions about me sometimes
 - C. There is another kind of list that is in many ways similar
 1. The Year End Inventory list
 2. If you are a business this list is essential
 - a) You need to know what you have and what you don’t have
 - b) No way to do business if you think you have inventory that you don’t really have
 3. Santa’s naughty or nice list is a form of year end inventory
 - a) How am I doing so far this year?
 - b) What kind of person am I becoming?
 - c) What about mistakes? Is it too late to change?
 4. There are times in life when it is good, and we need to stop and take stock - before it is too late and things get more difficult
 - D. In Dickens *A Christmas Carol* Ebenezer Scrooge is a man that is forced to slow down and take stock of his life
 1. When Scrooge returns home on Christmas Eve he gets an unexpected visit
 2. The ghost of his partner Jacob Marley, who died seven years earlier, appears to Scrooge - Let’s watch
 3. VIDEO
 - E. At the outset of this series, allow me to offer one caveat
 1. The way the story is written it seems to advocate a belief that human spirits are condemned to wander the earth to make up for the wrongs they did here on earth
 2. I am not sure that was Dickens’ actual view of the afterlife
 - a) He was intelligent and educated in church doctrine

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- b) In fact, the entire story was more a reaction against the church for not really being the church
 - (1) Dickens was a crusader that sought to help the poor
 - (2) So a story that displays the miserly nature of Scrooge, changing into the generous man that knew how to keep Christmas is exactly what Dickens was about in life
- 3. But to be clear, there will be parallels drawn from Dickens' story, but some of them may be inexact
 - a) So please do not attack me after thinking I do not know that everything does not fit neatly and cleanly
 - b) But the parallel today of ghosts wandering the earth to make up for what they have done in life - there is nothing in the Bible about that
- F. What Dickens does show us is an image of what has been called "the law of the harvest"
 - 1. Galatians 6:7-8 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."
 - 2. This gives us the first principle we see in this part of Dickens story: we must face the consequences of our words and actions
- II. Principle 1: Facing the consequences
 - A. Scrooge is having to face the truth that actions have consequences
 - 1. Something we all need to understand
 - 2. We may not be aware of the consequences in the present, but that does not mean they do not exist
 - a) The point of Santa's list, or Marley's chain is that life accumulates
 - b) Our naughtiness or niceness does catch up with us
 - B. The truth is good works do matter
 - 1. Let me make this perfectly clear as we start this part, I am NOT speaking about the basis for salvation
 - a) We will talk about this more fully in a little bit, but faith in Jesus Christ is the only basis for salvation
 - b) What Jesus did for us on the cross and our trust in His work is how we get to heaven
 - c) No amount of good works get us to heaven - good works are the proof that we have been saved
 - 2. Here is the problem: many people misinterpret God's grace to mean that how we live no longer matters
 - a) If good works cannot save us, they must not matter
 - b) But Scripture will not allow for that kind of thinking

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- c) We talked about the “law of the harvest” a minute ago - what you sow in seed, that is what you reap in harvest
 - (1) Sinful seed, sinful harvest
 - (2) Spirit filled seed, Spirit filled harvest
 - d) Jesus used the imagery of the harvest too in Matthew 7:15-27 (p. 972)
 - (1) There is no way to read this and not think that our actions matter
 - (2) Our actions have consequences
 - (3) Faith bears fruit
 - (a) If it does not, we have to ask if it was really faith
 - e) So we live in a place of tension between grace and works
 - (1) So there is no doubt that it is the grace of God that saves us, and the grace of God alone
 - (2) But, genuine faith works
 - (a) Paul summed it up well
 - (b) Ephesians 2:8-10 (p. 1174)
 - i) It is God’s grace that saves
 - ii) But it saves us toward good works - the good works matter
3. Scrooge is given a vivid look at the consequences of his actions
- a) He had focused only on selfish pursuits for so long instead of focusing on good works
 - b) The sad thing is Scrooge was not always like that
 - (1) At one time he was a loving young man
 - (2) He became chained up in his own selfish interests
 - (3) It turned him into a bitter old man
 - (a) One that was miserly and loved money
 - (b) One that showed no mercy on tenants in his properties
 - (c) He refused to give to charity, and didn’t care for his employees
- C. Now we come to the question: What Christmas chains have we forged?
- 1. What have we sown - especially, what negative things have we sown that are holding us in chains?
 - 2. Many during this time of year are held by materialism
 - a) Wanting more stuff
 - b) Spending more than we should to get stuff or give stuff
 - c) Spending high amounts so other people will love us
 - d) Are we being held by the chains of materialism?
 - 3. Are we held by the chains of bitterness and hurt
 - a) Have we nursed old wounds
 - b) Have we held on to our right to be hurt
 - (1) I realized that I had felt that way - holding on to hurt

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- (2) You know what broke me free from it: understanding that my feeling of hurt was really a smoke screen for selfishness
- 4. Maybe you are held by the chains of unrealistic expectations
 - a) You expect your home life to be a certain way
 - b) Or you are playing the part of Clark Griswold and expect the perfect family Christmas
 - c) Instead of excitement about being with family, it leads to anxiety
- 5. Maybe our chains are more related to our faith
 - a) Maybe we are chained to a sin that we know is dragging us down
 - (1) We want to be done with it, but it seems to rear its ugly head just when we think its gone
 - (2) We know it is sucking the life out of us, and we have to do something
 - b) Or perhaps we are chained to things that are keeping us from seeking God's kingdom
 - (1) Lack of passion for God's Word
 - (2) Lack of time
 - (3) Lack of compassion for your fellow man
 - c) Or maybe your chains are holding you back from a full Christian life
 - (1) Maybe you have not been in fellowship with other believers to help you grow
 - (2) Maybe you only give, give give, but never take back in because you are out of balance
- D. If we follow the "law of the harvest" it might seem hopeless - we have sowed to these things so that is what we will harvest
 - 1. And if we are looking only for the power within ourselves, we would be right
 - 2. We have to look for the power outside ourselves
- III. Principle 2 - The hope for change is found in the hope of Christ's coming
 - A. The gospel is not just for entering into the Christian life, the gospel is for all of us at all stages of the Christian life
 - B. Jesus helps break the chains that hold us
 - 1. It is important at this time of the birth of Christ to remember that Christmas, and indeed all of life, is not about me
 - 2. Jacob Marley describes this when Scrooge asks, "Why do spirits walk the earth."
 - a) "It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes forth not in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world - oh, woe is me! And witness

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- what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth and turned to happiness!”
- b) Again, we don't subscribe to spirits being condemned to walk the earth, but listen to what Marley is saying
 - (1) Mankind is our business
 - (a) Dickens wrote this because he did like the gospels, he did like Jesus, and he didn't see that in the church
 - (b) He wanted mankind, and the church in particular to exemplify the ideals that Jesus taught
 - (2) Marley also says that he would have been happier on earth if he had shared what he is witnessing now
 - (a) It is a way of saying that we are created for fellowship
 - (b) We are created for love and community
 - 3. Like Scrooge, we can lose sight of this fact, thinking that business, or our activities, or the preparations for Christmas are more important than caring for others
 - a) “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge.
 - b) “Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.”
 - c) Truth is that we never know how our behavior may affect other things
 - (1) The story is told of William McKinley, 25th President of the US
 - (2) He had two men he was trying to decide between for appointment to be ambassador to a foreign country.
 - (3) They were equally qualified in virtually every way
 - (4) However, McKinley remembered a time when he boarded a streetcar at the height of rush hour
 - (5) An elderly woman got on carrying a heavy clothes basket, yet no one got up to offer her a seat, so she walked to the back of the streetcar, barely able to keep her balance
 - (6) One of the two men McKinley was considering was sitting near where this lady was now standing
 - (7) Instead of getting up to help her or offer her his seat, the man deliberately shifted his newspaper to look as if he had not seen her
 - (8) When McKinley noticed this, he got up, took the basket from her and offered her his seat

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- (9) The man didn't realize anyone was watching, but his one act of selfishness would later cost him his hopes of being an ambassador
- d) Freedom comes in getting outside of ourselves, and giving out to others, just as God's Son was selfless and gave for us
- e) The ultimate chain-breaking power is found not in ourselves
 - (1) It is found in Jesus Christ
 - (2) He was able to break the greatest of chains that we got ourselves into - the chains of sin
 - (a) There was a young Russian soldier whose father was friends with the Czar Nicholas II - he was given the responsibility to distribute money each month to the soldiers in his barracks.
 - (b) The young man had taken to gambling the governments funds
 - (c) One day he was told a representative from the Czar would be coming to take account of the books. He knew he was in trouble as he reviewed the books and saw the amount he owed
 - (d) He determined the best thing he could do was commit suicide
 - (e) He wrote on the bottom of the ledger a summary of his misdeeds adding, "A great debt! Who can pay?"
 - (f) The plan was to pull the trigger at midnight - instead he fell asleep
 - (g) That night, Czar Nicholas, in his usual custom, was making rounds of the barracks. He saw a light and so stopped at this man's barracks. He recognized the sleeping boy as his friend's son. He read the ledger and was about to arrest the young boy when he saw his words, "A great debt! Who can pay?" He wrote one word and left.
 - (h) When the soldier woke up and saw the time, he reached for his gun. As he did so, his eye caught the ledger and a new word scribbled at the bottom. Beneath his note was the word, "Nicholas"
 - (i) Only the Czar could pay such a debt, and did. In the morning a messenger came with the exact amount the young soldier owed
 - (3) "A great debt to God! Who can pay?" At the bottom of our ledger is scribbled "Jesus Christ"
 - (a) Only Jesus can pay the debt
 - (b) Only Jesus can break the chains
- f) And that is one of the differences between Scrooge and us
 - (1) His is a humanistic story of conversion
 - (2) It is a great parable - but it is incomplete without Jesus Christ

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- C. Change is God's main business
 - 1. So we are not doomed to wear the "chains forged in life"
 - 2. The chains that may hold us even today, Christ can break those chains
 - 3. No matter your chain
 - a) Materialism, Bitterness
 - b) Unhealthy spiritual choices or patterns - all of these and many more can be broken by Jesus Christ and the power of the cross
- D. The story of Zechariah reminds us of God's ability to break chains
 - 1. If you remember, when Zechariah heard that he was to have a child with his wife, Elizabeth, Zechariah did not believe the angel that was sent to him to give him the news
 - 2. The result was Zechariah was struck mute through the entire pregnancy
 - a) The Bible does not say if Elizabeth enjoyed the quiet or not
 - b) You be the judge
 - 3. Zechariah had created a chain of doubt and unbelief
 - 4. When the child was born, Zechariah believed God and named him just what God told him to, John
 - 5. The chains of doubt were broken, and so were the chains of being mute - Zechariah got his voice back
 - 6. Luke 1:76-79 (p. 1026) - Zechariah used his voice to praise God
- E. So what chains do you want to break?
 - 1. Have you become bitter - at the season, at a family member or friend, about your circumstances (your job, your financial status, the state of your marriage, or lack of a marriage)
 - 2. Are you struggling with the chains of doubt?
 - a) Doubting that you are lovable, doubting that anyone cares
 - b) Doubting God cares, or will help, or can help?
 - 3. Have you created chains in your spiritual life by unhealthy patterns?
 - a) Have you isolated yourself from others thinking you only need your Bible and God?
 - b) Maybe you have stopped praying because of circumstances, time, doubt?
 - c) Maybe you put your Bible down and have not read it in a long while - again because of circumstances, time, doubt?
- F. Maybe we should turn this metaphor around and think about what holy chains do we want to be forging
 - 1. Who do you want to reach out to in love and with the life giving power of Christ?
 - 2. What bonds of friendship do you want to renew?

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3. What ways do you want to make the links between you and God stronger?
4. Instead of believing things will never change, we believe that Christ can set us free this Christmas into the life He has always promised
 - a) John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”
 - b) Or if I may bend the metaphor - The thief comes to subdue, chain up and enslave
 - (1) That’s the agenda of the enemy
 - (2) That is where Satan wants to keep you this Christmas
 - c) But Jesus, Jesus comes to give life, and give it to the full
- G. It is okay to think of the chains that have held us
 1. That is to identify them, and submit them to the power of Christ
 2. That is to think of how Jesus wants to obliterate those chains
- H. It really is this simple: Christ offers freedom by transforming our hearts and lives
 1. Christ can transform a desire to receive into a desire to give
 2. Christ can transform a desire to be right into the desire to seek forgiveness
 3. Christ can transform a desire to hold back into a desire to engage
- I. Christ can and will transform our hearts as we submit the chains of our lives to Him for freedom