The People Who Missed Christmas
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: 1275

I want to share with you this morning some thoughts on the theme, "The People Who Missed Christmas." What got me started about this was I had been watching with anxiety and concern the situation in Iran. As you know the people of Iran have taken captive the Americans in our Embassy, holding them in situations that we really can't understand at this point we don't know all that is going on. And in recent days because Christmas is such a special part of American life culturally, the news media has been focusing on the fact that these people will miss Christmas.

In fact, I heard one particular mayor of a town say that he was so concerned that they would miss Christmas that the town was going to put on a very unique kind of protest and what he did was he had all the signal lights in the city turn to red and every car stopped for 5O seconds and everyone got out and prayed a silent prayer that these people might not miss Christmas.

As I began to think about the fact that these people would miss Christmas I began to think about the fact that they're not the only people who will miss Christmas. In fact, I'm quite afraid that almost everybody in the world is going to miss Christmas. Most people no matter where they are or what their circumstances are miss Christmas. It sounds initially like that would be a rather silly statement because it's pretty hard to miss since we,re all drowning in a sea of advertising, publicity, promotion, public relations about Christmas. I know about a month ago my children started a little game. Everywhere we drive they began to count the Christmas lights and every house or every building that had Christmas lights we began to count. And finally it got to the point where nobody could count that high anymore. And when Melinda stops counting everybody has to quit because the game is not fair any longer. So, no question about the fact that we know there is a Christmas celebration. I'm not just sure we know what it's really about. At least pragmatically it seems as though we are blind, deaf and dumb to the reality of Christmas. In spite of the media, in spite of the public relations, in spite of the advertising and in spite of all of those things that attract our attention it seems to me that most people will miss Christmas, not just the hostages in Iran. But you know, as I thought about it, it's kind of because of the fact that there is so much that's cluttered up Christmas. Now for us who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, Christmas is a time to focus on His birth. The great reality of the incarnation that God became a man. That tremendous incomprehensible miracle of divine energy that brought God into human history. We know that. But even in our own lives because of the complexity of what is happening around us Christmas can be lost to us in a very practical way. I think, for example, that Satan has cluttered almost every good Christian concept with so much needless paraphernalia that it gets lost. Let me give you a little bit of the history of Christmas to show you what

I mean.

In the middle of the fourth century the bishop of Jerusalem wrote a letter to the bishop of Rome. And he said I would like for you to ascertain the date of the birth of Christ so that we could establish a date and have a celebration annually. The bishop of Rome sent word back to the bishop of Jerusalem that Christ was born on December 25.

And by the end of the fourth century this had become the accepted custom and since then every December 25 focuses on the birth of Christ.

Now Bible scholars know that there is absolutely no evidence at all that Christ was born on December 25. In fact, there is not only no evidence that He was but there is some evidence that He was not. Well why then did the bishop of Rome do this? Well, the conclusion is that he did it rather arbitrarily. And as we get back into history we find out why he did this. December was the major month of pagan celebrations. December was the month of festivals and feast things and orgies and all kinds of pageants put on by the pagans in honor of their gods as winter had reached its fullness and they were anticipating the thaw and the spring and the planting and the strength of the sun returning and the clouds rolling back. And so December became a time of high, boisterous, pagan revelry. Such activities, for example, are found in pagan histories in December as feasting, as adorning the homes with evergreens, as hanging trinkets on trees, as lighting candles, as involving mistletoe, as exchanging gifts and general merry making and feastings deteriorating into drunkenness and orgies in these traditional heathen celebrations. Now that is why the bishop chose December. And he focused on the 25th because that seemed to be the high point of these festivities. And his thought was this. The wild winter revelries of the pagans must be sanctified by Christianity therefore, we will impose our celebration of the birth of Christ on the pagan celebrations and sanctify them all. It was a nice thought.

But it was dead wrong. Because what happened was the heathen festivity went on and the church was unable to make them conform to the sanctification of the true Christian celebration. And so what you have now is a strange weird marriage of the pagan and the Christian that we call Christmas.

Let me give you some illustrations. To the Romans the month of December was important because it marked what is known as the Festival of the Saturnalia. Saturn was the god of agriculture and they were then holding this great feast and involved in orgy and prostitution and all kinds of drunkenness and everything in honor of Saturn that he might begin to bring the spring so that crops might be grown. One of the common customs among the Romans at Saturnalia was giving gifts to one another and as far as we can tell that is where the idea of present came from. And by the way, in the festival of Saturnalia the most common gifts were little idols that were made in the image of the multiplicity of Roman deities. They were made out of clay and they were made out of marble and they were made out of silver and they were the gifts that were given. They also were big on evergreens which they

would hang all over their houses and that apparently is where the wreath, at least initially, came from. North of the Romans was the barbaric northlands.

The Northland people had a great celebration during December known as Yule. And in the Yule season and the Yule celebration they honored the gods Odin and Thor. If you're from Minnesota you understand that. Those are the people who originated in those lands. And it involved festivals, music, drinking and so forth. To the east and persia at the time of December they worshipped Mithra, the god of light. In England to the west the Druids who were involved in strange priestly worship engulfing demonic and occultic powers were gathering sacred mistletoe for their sacrifices which they made in the month of December. Sacrifices geared toward friendship and peace. And what the Druids would do is this. They would march out in the area of the oak groves where the mistletoe grew and they would be led by their priests in their long white robes and they would be going to their chants and their celebration. The priests would ascend into the trees with golden sickles and they would cut down the mistletoe. And when all of the mistletoe had been gathered and passed around the people then there would be the sacrifice of two white oxen and the mistletoe were then to be taken back into the homes and they were to be hung in the homes and anytime anybody came under the mistletoe he was to immediately embrace anyone else under there, it was an effort to reconcile people whether they liked it or not. And that's where the mistletoe came from. The drama of the crib which we know as the manger scene was popularized by St. Francis in the thirteenth century. Three hundred years later Luther picked up the idea of a Christmas tree and brought a tree into his house and put candles on it to symbolize the sparkling stars and the sky over the forest. The trees and trinkets hanging on them had been part of the festivals of the pagans for centuries.

Holland got into the act by giving us their favorite saint, St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was a white bearded bishop of Asia Minor who was such a popular fellow that when he died it was believed that he came back every December 6th. And St. Nicholas would come back every December 6th and he would ride through the streets on a white horse and all the little Dutch kids would put their wooden shoes out on the porch and as he came along he would put goodies in the shoes of the good kids and where there were bad children he would leave a switch for obvious reasons. And the Dutch called St. Nicholas Sinterklaas and we got Santa Claus.

Caroling started in the fourteenth century along with jesters, musicians and mummers who went around with funny masks and even today they still have a mummers parade, I think it's in Philadelphia, isn't it? I was wondering where stockings came from. You know, hanging stockings up? It seemed a little strange. And I read a little bit about that and I found out that Sinterklaas, St. Nicholas, Santa Claus, whatever, was going through his act one year of putting things in the shoes and I guess he got pretty good at that so he started flipping things into the chimneys. And in one home, anyway, some folks had hung their stockings underneath the fireplace to dry them out over night and the stuff he was flipping in was landing in the stockings and that's where we got stockings. Not very theological, is it?

Christmas cards began in 1846, they were printed in London by a very enterprising man named Sir Henry Cole who was the owner of an art shop and saw it as a way to make a lot of money. And all the first Christmas cards printed for him were printings of drinking scenes.

What a mess, frankly, Christmas is. No wonder so many people miss Christmas. With all the paraphernalia and the trappings around it the simplicity of the birth of Christ is literally drowned in a sea of paganism. You say, well I guess it's true that today people miss Christmas. And all you have to do is look around and you know it, don't you? Busy, doing all kinds of things, but missing Christ. You want to know something? If you think it's something that it happened today, I want you to know -- and we're going to go right back to the Bible -- that when Christmas happened in Bethlehem most people missed it then too.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 2 and verse 7, Luke chapter 2 and verse 7. Now I want you to think with me as we look at this truth. This is the story, of course, in Luke 2 of the birth of Christ and I just want you to look at verse 7 and we're only going to pick out some highlights to illustrate this matter of the people who missed Christmas. Verse 7, speaking of Mary it says; "And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloth (really, they weren't clothes really, they were just long strips of cloth) and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." Now the first person who missed Christmas was the innkeeper. The innkeeper missed Christmas. It was right in front of him but he missed it. He had to confront a pregnant woman and her husband but he had no room for them. And so he missed it. Look back at verse 7. He not only missed it by not letting them in to stay with him but he missed it by being so indifferent that he doesn't even appear to have called for any help for Mary when she gave birth because verse 7 is markedly concerned with a lonely birth, a lonely birth. We don't even know where Joseph was. If I know anything about fathers at the time of births, especially young fathers like Joseph who could have been as young as 15 or 16 years of age, he would have been little help at all, at this time. And so it writes, she brought forth her first born son.

Who Did? She did. Middle Eastern people are hospitable, Jewish people are kind and caring people. They were not barbaric people. They were not the kind of people that we might have read about in the Aboriginal tribes that sent their women off into the jungle to have their babies on a great big banana leaf or something. These people are civilized, intelligent, educated people who understand about human life. These are not the kind of people who are going to leave a woman alone or are they?

Mary brought forth her own son. And then it says, she wrapped Him in swaddling cloth. Mary did. Where were the midwives? Where were the people who were supposed to care for things like that? Where was the innkeeper? Didn't he know anybody who could help? Didn't his wife concern herself with this? Or, wasn't there some source of assistance to Mary? Ah, but after all hadn't the prophets said He would be despised and rejected? And wouldn't it be true that this could be the case at His

very birth? And it says, she laid Him in a manger. An animal feeding trough. Swaddling cloth, by the way, were long strips of cloth and when an infant was born, immediately the infant was wrapped, its limbs and its body in this swaddling cloth. And then, of course, in an outer blanket. That was the tradition. And certainly there would be a midwife to clean the baby and to do that. But, no, Mary did that. This was a lonely birth.

It wasn't as if somebody missed it, she must have been obviously with child. G. Campbell Morgan writes this, think of the pathos of it. She brought forth, she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, it is very beautiful but oh the pity of it. The tragedy of it. The loneliness of it that in that hour of all hours when womanhood should be surrounded by the tenderest care Mary was alone. The method of the writer is very distinct. She with her own hands wrapped the baby around with those swaddling cloth? and laid Him in a manger. There was no one to do it for her. And again, I say the pity of it and yet the glory of it to the heart of Mary.

Now I don't know anything about the innkeeper because the Bible doesn't say anything about him. He wasn't interested so he's not even included. But it's interesting to think about the scene a little bit.

Some people feel that the child was born in a stable. And we've seen pictures and cards of stables which are just kind of lean-to's with a little roof and the animals are there. And others think he was born in a cave because there are many caves there and the church of the Nativity where Christ is to believed to have been born in Bethlehem is built over a cave. There are others who believe that Christ was born in an open courtyard, in the inn. There are others who say He was born out in a field. You want to know something? Nobody knows.

Some who look at the word inn here which is kataluma note that it is not the normal word for inn. And that's true. There's a different word for inn which means a hostelry, an inn with food and bedding and all of those things where there is a host. And that's not this word. But the word kataluma is used in Luke 22:11 to speak of the guest room in a house. And so some feel that what really happened was Joseph and Mary were coming along in Bethlehem anticipating that they were going to stay with some friends or relatives or acquaintances and that they would use their guest room. But the hospitality was not available to them for perhaps the reason that the guest room was already occupied. And so maybe it was some friends they were counting on whose guest room was occupied. Maybe it was an inn that had no room. Some commentators go even further and say the word kataluma was used primarily to speak of a lean-to that was built on the out of doors into which people could simply go for shelter. It was just a wall and a top and you just took your animals in there for shelter in a coldness of the night and nobody cared for you and there was no water there and there was no nothing. But people would put them on their property to assist those who were traveling. We really don't know.

Whether it was an innkeeper, whether it was a friend, whether it was simply a man on whose property was one of these little lean-to's, whether it was an open field, whether it was a courtyard, it is impossible to know. But whatever hospitality they may have sought or whatever hospitality they may have anticipated it was unavailable to them. The word kataluma translates five different Hebrew words in the Old Testament so it has a very elastic meaning and doesn't really help us at all. Whatever the situation, they were turned away. The innkeeper missed Christmas. And what amazes me is that he missed it even though it might have happened on his own property And I began to think about why he missed Christmas. Simple answer. Preoccupation.

It seems best to me. That seems to be it. Preoccupation. You say - What do you mean? Well, he was so busy. I mean his inn was full or his guest room was full or all of his little lean-to's were full. Why? Because it vas the census in Bethlehem and the city was literally bulging with everybody who ever had any ancestry there and they were coming; to the city and since it was the city of David those who were in the line of David were there. And that's why Joseph and Mary were there coming from the line of David, one through Solomon and one through Nathan. So, there they were. And the city was bursting with people. And he was busy caring for his guests in his house and whatever situation he was involved with and he wasn't hostile and he wasn't unloving and he wasn't unsympathetic and he wasn't really indifferent he was just busy. Just real busy. I guess there are a lot of people like that. The chambers of their souls are filled with needless things, filled with human interests. They're filled with the stuff that doesn't matter and they miss the Christ of God.

My wife and I were commenting on one of our few shopping excursions some weeks ago how much stuff there is to buy that nobody needs. Have you ever noticed that? Nobody needs it. You can't even use it. It doesn't do anything but sit there, somewhere or hang. But our society is literally filled with the unnecessary, the insignificant, and the meaningless. And we spend a fortune to amass it. So we can die and let our kids fight over it.

Meaningless, needless, useless, human interests squeezes out room for Christ. Our time is demanded by a thousand other things. Our possessions - We're so busy figuring out what we want, how to get it at the cheapest price, buying it, taking care of it, polishing it, storing' it, keeping it up. And then, of course, the games we play. We've got to be playing' this and playing that and that takes a lot of time. And then all of our pleasures and all of our passions and all of our parties and all of our preoccupation and all of our presents and all of everything that doesn't amount to anything. And we miss Him. Crowded out by a tyrant world that dictates to us what we will think and what we will do and what we will buy. And we march around with rings in our noses, pulled to those places that are needless. And I guess I never see this more obvious than at Christmas. So much misappropriation of the meaning of this season.

I have to admit this. It was an ignorant preoccupation on the part of the innkeeper, he didn't know. He didn't know. Ignorant preoccupation. I look at the world and that's what I see, they just don't know.

They don't know who Christ is. They don't know who He is, they don't know why He came. They're just ignorant. And ignorantly preoccupied with the mundane and the meaningless. Oh how ridiculous it is to live your entire life in mundane, meaningless activity, wake up sometime in eternity without God and look back over all of the waste.

The innkeeper missed it. He was too busy. Look at your own life. Did you spend more time shopping then you did adoring Christ? Did you spend more money on stuff then you invested in His kingdom? Then maybe you've been in the trap. too. Where the innkeeper was.

I want you to meet another man who missed Christmas. Matthew chapter 2. This man really missed it. And he's very different than the innkeeper. He wasn't ignorant he was very well informed. His name is Herod. And believe me, Herod missed Christmas. Matthew 2:1; "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem saying, Where is He that is born" Now watch' this. "King of the Jews for we have seen His star in the east and are come to worship Him?" When Herod the king had heard these things he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." Verse 7, "Then Herod when he had privately called the wise men and inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared and he sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search diligently for the young child and when you have found Him bring me word again that I may come and worship Him also.

Now Herod pretended to want to worship Jesus Christ but he was tremendously fearful because one had been born who was called the King of the Jews. And it says there Herod, verse 3, the king. He was the king and when he knew there was born a king he was afraid. Well, it says he was troubled, it uses the word that means to be agitated, stirred up, shaken up. It is the idea of total panic. He panicked. He had no room for Jesus. Why? Fear Fear. He was afraid of Him. He was afraid of another king.

Let me tell you why. Herod was an Edomite, he wasn't even a Jew. What was he doing ruling in the land? Well, he was of the Idumean family an Edomite, he was following along behind his father Antipater who had done some favors to Rome and Herod continued to do that and while Rome was occupying Palestine, Herod did everything he could to get into the favor of Rome. He played the game to the hilt. He sought political goals and political ends and the power play was going on all the time and Rome really trusted Herod and Rome really kind of liked Herod so finally the Senate appointed him, get this, king of Judea. And he was not even a Jew.

Now when he heard there was born one called the king of the Jews, it's no wonder he panicked. Because he was a political madman. Because he sought glory and grandeur and a kingly place he was immediately threatened even though this was a baby and he was an old man. The rumor of another king panicked Herod. And he was a vile man.

While a young governor in Galilee under his father he had swiftly and effectively destroyed all the guerrillas that were trying to fight against him. He was very efficient in collecting Roman taxes and had taxed the people. He had murdered all the Hasmoneans and by the way, they were the sons of the Maccabeans who had led the great revolution against Greek power and he wanted to make sure that they didn't do it again so he slaughtered them. He had ten wives. You can imagine. And twelve children. His most notable wife Mariamne had a brother Aristobulus who was the high priest, he was afraid of Aristobulus so he murdered him.

On a hot day he said he wanted to go swimming with him and he dove in and he had men dive in and drown him. And then he had a funeral and stood there and cried as if it were an accident. He had his wife then killed. He had her mother then murdered. He was afraid of his two son that they would take his throne so he murdered both of them. He hopelessly was suspicious of everybody so that his entire life is one of plotting and execution. And then the coup de grace on his evil life was that when he was about to die he went down to Jericho to pass his final hours and he commanded that all of those that were under him collect the distinguish citizens of Jerusalem, everyone of them that were important. And they were all collected and put in prison and he said the moment I die slaughter them all because this people will not weep when I die and I want them weeping even if it's over somebody else.

He was a wretched man. Now when he heard that a child was born that was to be the king of the Jews, verse 16 of chapter 2 says the wise men didn't of course come back and tell him so he saw that he was mocked by the wise men and he was exceedingly angry and he sent forth and he slew all the children who were in Bethlehem and in all its borders from two years old and under and two years old means anything from the first month you enter that second year to the fullness of that second year. And so they were slaughtered, all of these children in order to try and wipe out the child. And as you know, God had already warned Joseph and Mary and they had taken Jesus and fled to Egypt.

Why did Herod miss Christmas? Fear, jealous fear. You say, - Well, surely there aren't any Herods left. Surely there aren't any people who slaughter people. Oh, there are around the world, believe me, there are. And I think we're realizing more and more about it. Man is depraved. There are always Herods in any society. But I think there is a greater lesson for the mass of humanity then just to see this as Herod only. Because there are many, many, many people who miss Christmas because of the same basic kind of fear that Herod had. Herod's fear was that somebody else would take his throne. That was his fear. And I would affirm to you that there are a lot of people like that. Herod wasn't about to let this little child interfere with his career, with his position, with his power, with his ambition, with his plans and with his lifestyle.

He was not about to let somebody else be the king. And I guess I have seen as much of that as I have any other kind of reason for rejecting Christ. Oh, there are people who want Jesus as a resource when they get into trouble. There are people who want Jesus as sort of a nice spiritual

friend. There are people who maybe even want Jesus as somebody to keep them out of hell but they're not interested in crowning Him Lord. And that's why the Bible says that when you confess Jesus as Lord you're saved, that's the basis of it. There are people who want to add Jesus to their own lifestyle and their own career, and their own position and their own power and prestige and whatever else they are hanging onto. They're fearfully jealous of losing their own self- determination, they're fearful of giving up their own plans. They're fearful of their own priorities, their own values, their own morals. They don't want to come to Christ because it will cramp their style. Because it will lay claim on their life that means they have to alter the way they live and think and talk and act. And they want to run the show. They want to be their own Herod of their own little kingdom. Their own thin, flat little kingdom.

The world is full of Herods who cry out - we will not have this man to reign over us. Today that is true. People have their little kingdom. And they want to run their own life, their own career, their own fame their own sex life, their own dissolute life of drugs and drink. Their own life of ego fulfillment and the media just keeps telling them - do it, grab your own life, do your own thing, master your own fate, chart your own destiny, be your own man, be your own woman. And we have a world of kings who are not about to bow the knee to Jesus Christ and so they miss Christmas just like Herod did, though they probably wouldn't slaughter babies. Theirs is the same reason, jealous fear.

What about you? Have you said no to Jesus Christ in your life because you are afraid of the claim He will lay on you? Because you want to be the Lord of your life? The master of your fate? The king of your little thin kingdom? That's tragic. His kingdom is so much more glorious.

There's a third group that missed Christmas. Look back at chapter 2 of Matthew verse 4, this is shocking. Herod heard from the wise men that this child was to be born and, boy, he wanted to find out where immediately to put the child to death. And so he gathered, verse 4, the chief priests and the scribes of the people together and demanded of them where the Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea for thus it is written by the prophet and thou Bethlehem in the land of Judah art not the least among the princes of Judah for out of these shall come a governor that shall rule My people Israel.

He said he called all the experts together. The brain trust. The theologians. The chief priests were the high priests, the captain of the temple police and the best of all the priests out of all the orders with the great administrative skills and the great teaching skills and the great leadership skills, they had become the chief priests. They were the minds, the brains. They were the theological minds of the day, the Sanhedrin. And they knew all the scriptures and their friends the scribes who were the linguists and the interpreters and the ones who knew the culture and the history that surrounded the biblical data and the combination of all of these men got together and they said - we know where the Messiah is to be born. And they quoted Micah, chapter 5 verse 2, that Old Testament prophet who said Bethlehem. They knew.

You know what shocks me? Just shocks me! They never went there! Did you ever think about that? They never went there. You say - Is that surprising? It is to me. What was the one thing the Jews had been looking for? Since Moses had said there would come one known as that prophet, what is the one person they had looked for all the way through their history? A deliverer and here they were under Roman oppression, always they had looked for a deliverer. They had longed for such a one to come.

It had been the great hope of all their ages. It had been the one that they had looked for, the destiny of Israel was bound up in the coming deliverer, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed, the greater son then David's son, the one who would come and establish the kingdom the great hope of their hearts, the hunger in their breasts illustrated in the ministry of John the Baptist as they flocked to hear of one who was preparing the way for the Messiah. And here were the brains of theology, here were the ones who knew it all and yet they never even bothered to walk two miles to three miles south to Bethlehem to find out for themselves if this was not the Messiah. Why? Why did the Sanhedrin miss Christmas? I'll tell you why. One word, indifference.

Indifference, they didn't care. The ultimate insult, the ultimate insult At least Herod feared the kingliness of this child. At least the inn-keeper could claim that he was ignorant. But these men had all the facts, they just didn't care. Having the Messiah was no big deal to them. They didn't need a Messiah. Why? They were already self-righteous. They were already perfect. They had already kept the law. They were already all that God could ever ask of them in their own minds, they were sickening proud. You could call it proud indifference.

And by, the way, beloved, indifference is always pride. You're too busy with you to be concerned about him. Engrossed in their own pride, their self-righteousness, their self-sufficiency, they carried on their ritual and their legal banter back and forth in the confines of their own little comfortable self-righteous system and there was no room for the Son of God in that. In fact, when He did show up they hated Him and despised Him and plotted His murder and screamed for His blood. They didn't want Him. They didn't need Him. And I'm reminded of the plaintive cry of Jeremiah in Lamentations 1 as he watched all of Israel going down the path of destruction and he cried out - Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? I mean, can you just be indifferent? The ultimate the ultimate crime against Christ, is to be indifferent. You just don't need Him, you're not interested.

Why were they indifferent? Well, because of pride or if you want to look at it from the other angle because they didn't think they had a need. What did they need with a Savior? What did they need with a Messiah? They were all right just the way they were. And Jesus points this out in the ninth chapter of Matthew with a very stinging sarcastic rebuke, in fact it may be the most sarcastic statement Jesus ever made.

In Matthew 9:10, "It came to pass as Jesus sat eating in the house behold many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples." When Jesus had a meal in the house He invited the people who needed to come. He invited the people who had problems and knew it. And so He invites the riff-raff, the scum, the outcasts, the tax collectors, the collaborators with Rome, the traitors and the sinners, the vile, evil, street people and He sat down with them. And the Pharisees who were the holier-than-thous said unto His disciples Why eateth your Master with tax collectors and sinners? And then Jesus rebuked them in blistering sarcasm, He said - "They that are well need not a physician but they that are sick." You who are so well, you don't need a physician. Sarcasm, they were the sickest of all but didn't know it. And then He said - Go and learn what it means, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. Mercy means you can't make it on your own, your sacrifices are insufficient, your sin is too great and God must be merciful, I offer you mercy, I don't tolerate your sacrifices. And then He says, "For I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Jesus is saying - When you make a feast you invite the coldly orthodox. The piously self righteous when I make a feast I invite the ones who need to come and want to come. He says I didn't come to invite the people who are so self satisfied they're convinced of their own goodness and don't need anybody's help I came for the people who know they are broke and sinful and desperately aware of their need for a Savior.

You see, the problem of indifference is the problem of not realizing the state of sinfulness. I think there are many people today who miss Christmas because of that. They ignore Christ because they don't know they are sinful. They don't care about the Savior because they don't understand that they need to be saved. They don't understand that the wages of sin is death, that sin plummets people into an eternal hell. They don't understand that. So consequently they ignore the remedy because they don't even qualify the disease. The innkeeper missed Christmas, because of ignorant preoccupation. Herod missed Christmas because of jealous fear. The Sanhedrin missed Christmas because of indifferent pride.

Fourthly, Jerusalem missed Christmas. Isn't that amazing? Jerusalem right there missed Christmas. Shocking. Back to Luke chapter 2, let me show you something. In Luke chapter 2 verse 8, "There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night when an angel of the Lord came to them," and you know the rest of the story. The angel told them what to do and the shepherds came and they saw the Christ child. And verse 20 says; "The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told unto them."

Out of the whole of Jerusalem society do you know who God picked to tell this to? Shepherds. Now let me tell you something, folks, shepherds were not the aristocracy. Shepherds were not at the top of the list they were at the bottom of the list. Did you know that the shepherds were really a despised

group because they couldn't maintain all of the ceremonial washings and couldn't carry out all of the ceremonial activities and all of the festivals and feasts and all of those things because of their occupation they were busy tending to the sheep all the time? And there is some historical evidence of quite an interesting nature that the sheep that were kept for use in the temple as sacrificial lambs were kept on the hillsides of Bethlehem. It may just well be that the shepherds in Bethlehem's hillside were carrying for sheep which someday would be used as sacrifices in the temple. How fitting it would have been had that been true if it is true that the very shepherds that cared for sacrificial lambs were the first to know of the one born as the ultimate lamb.

These outcasts were the ones who knew. And they came. No one else came. Did you know that? And if you read further in the narrative of Luke you don't hear much beyond the shepherds. For example, in verse 25 of chapter 2, "And behold there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon." There was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. And then it goes on to tell how Simeon waited for the consolation of Israel, Simeon was righteous and Simeon was devout and Simeon wanted to see the Messiah and Simeon did see the Messiah and he glorified God and said - I'm ready to die now.

There was a man, is that all? No there was a lady too. Anna, verse 36, a widow and she saw the Messiah. And then in the end of verse 38 and she spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. Anna told a few others.

But the sad thing is, listen, people, the mass of Jerusalem missed Christmas. Totally. It happened a couple of miles away, it was the fulfillment of all their dreams and all their hopes. It was that great event which was to change the destiny of the world but they missed it.

Why did they miss it? Why did Jerusalem miss it? I'll tell you why, religion. Religion. They were very religious. They were so busy with their religion, carrying out their ritual that they missed the reality. Oh, they had all their feasts and all their festivals and all their ceremonies and all their washings and all of their rules and regulations and laws and myriads of things that had grown up around their religious system that weren't even biblical at all, all kinds of rules they had to keep. And in the midst of all of their religion they never got the message.

In fact, when Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 16, "Whom do men say that I am?" Their answer was "Some say You are Elijah, some say You are Jeremiah and some say You are one of the prophets," and they were all wrong. They never got the message. They screamed - We'll not have this man reign over us, get rid of Him.

They missed Him. Why? Religion. They were busy worshipping the right God in the wrong way. They had the God of the Scripture but they had it all twisted up and so they missed the point. Oh, listen, religion will damn you faster than anything else if it? false religion. Or if it's their true religion in the

wrong way. Because religion gives you a place to hide, and think you are spiritual. I think about so many people who come to Grace Church and we baptize them and the testimony goes like this - week after week when we do this - I was in the Roman Catholic Church for years and years and years but never met Jesus Christ until so-and-so talked to me about Christ and I gave my life to Him. Listen, you could be lost in any system and never know Christ.

There are people who come and say - I came from such-and-such a church and such-and-such a background, never knew Christ. Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Christian Science, on and on and on. All the cults and they don't know Christ. They talk about God the God of the Bible. They talk about Scripture. They miss Christmas. In the midst of their religion they are lost. You see, Jesus didn't fit their system. The way they had outlined it. And after the Sermon on the Mount they knew He didn't. Cause He set aside their whole system. You see, some people are already so secure in their religion they won't listen.

Have you ever tried to reach somebody like that? Ever try to talk to somebody who is all bogged down in a religion? Tough. Especially if it's got something to do with the Bible because they think they've got their system right. Religion will damn people to hell. Satan's ultimate, ultimate disguise is as an angel of what? Light. And so Jerusalem missed Christmas, while they were religious.

Fifth, the Romans missed Christmas, the Romans. Well, you say, "The Romans--what do you mean?" Listen this whole thing was set around the Roman scene. Luke gives us that. Matthew sets the scene around Herod the king of the Jews, Luke sets the scene around Caesar Augustus because Luke is a Gentile. And in Luke 2:1 there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus and the decree that everybody be taxed was made when Quirinius was governor of Syria and when that decree went out that set in motion the events that made Christ born at Bethlehem. In other words, the prophesy of Micah was really set in motion by a Gentile emperor Caesar.

Who was Augustus Caesar? It's fascinating to get into the background of this man. His name is Octavian, have you heard of that name? He's the grand nephew of of Julius Caesar. He was the Roman Emperor from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. He was basically a good man. He brought about the Pax Romana, he had a lot of reform, he did a lot of things to keep peace in the Roman Empire. He accomplished many, many things. Octavian when he found out, Julius Caesar, you know, was assassinated. And when he was the will was read and the will let all of his inheritance and all of the throne to Octavian who was a grand nephew. Caesar by passed everyone else and left it to Octavian. Octavian immediately changed his name to Caius Julius Caesar and that's why he was called Caesar, the Augustus means the revered majestic one. That's just a title.

So this man ruled during this time as the Roman Caesar. He was the one who made the decree. The Roman soldiers who made sure the people did it. Registering the people, taking the census, all through the life of Christ the Romans are in the scene at all times. At the death of Christ, He appears

before Pilate. He is executed by the Romans. The Romans lie about His resurrection, fabricating a story so as not to at all face the reality that He rose from the dead. The Romans are woven all through the biblical record. But they all missed Christmas. You know why? Idolatry, they had their own gods. Christ didn't fit in. And there are people in the world like that too. The Buddhists miss Christmas, they're worshipping the wrong god. Oh, Jerusalem, they worshipped the right God but in the wrong way and they missed it. And you can be a protestant and you can be in a church and miss it.

I couldn't help but notice they sent clergymen, a couple of protestant clergymen to Iran to minister to those people. Neither of those two clergymen as far as I know, either believe the Bible or the Deity of Christ. A lot of help they are. We have all kinds of clergymen like that. I don't know if you read the garbage in Newsweek magazine this week on the search for the historical Jesus? Just propagating all the lies that have come down the line from higher criticism that you can't believe the Bible and Jesus really isn't God and on and on.

But we have that - we have the religion that doesn't have the reality but on the other hand, like the Romans we also have idolatry. And some people just are just pagan and they miss Christmas. Not only because they worship Buddha or something else but because they have their own gods.

By the way, Octavian took the title of Pontifex Maximus which means the highest priest. He deified Julius Caesar with temples and deified himself by building temples to himself. The Romans worshipped him, multitudes of gods and the pinnacle was the worship of the emperor, so in all of this thing was idolatry, just gross idolatry. And as I mentioned at their Saturnalia feast they passed out little gifts of idols. And in the midst of their pagan idolatry they missed it all, they missed it all.

You know I think we have it today in our world. Oh, I don't think people worship the idols like they did then but I think we have our idols and our gods. Some people worship money. Some people worship sex. Some people worship cars. Materialism, boats, power, houses, whatever, prestige, popularity fame, and those are the pagan gods. Those are the idols of the 20th century. And if that is what you are worshipping you'll miss Christmas. You may get some presents and eat a big dinner and see a tree but you'll miss it. And you'll be nothing different then the Saturnalia who feasted in drunkenness and orgies. They never even knew the point, of Christmas.

So many people, beloved, miss Christmas because of false gods. Others because they worship the true God supposedly in the wrong way. Others because of a chilling prideful indifference. Others because of a ridiculous preoccupation with things that don't even matter.

Finally, and maybe this is the saddest of all, Nazareth missed Christmas. Nazareth. It says in Matthew 2:23 that after Herod had died Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus, the child Jesus, and went back to Nazareth. And in Luke chapter 2 verse 39 it says, "And when they had performed all

things according to the law of the Lord they returned into Galilee to their own city Nazareth and the child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon Him." And that verse is saying - when He got back to Nazareth He was not like any other child in Nazareth. He was different The grace of God was upon Him in a marvelous and incredible way. The child grew in wisdom and stature.

This was an amazing remarkable child like no other child who had ever lived. And there is an illustration immediately following of the remarkable nature of that child when He went to the Passover at 12 years of age and said He had to be about His Father's business. Confounding the doctors of theology. No child like Him. And He spent 30 years of His life in Nazareth and they missed Him. They missed it. There was no room for Him.

Nathaniel expressed the attitude about Nazareth, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was a crude, rude town and the people were violent and they had a bad reputation. And 30 years, and it's only a village, people, and 30 years Jesus in that place and in the fourth chapter of Luke a tragedy takes place. Finally, Jesus realizes it's time to tell the Nazarenes who He is. And verse 16, "He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up and as is custom - He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read and there was delivered up to Him the book of the prophet Isaiah and when He had opened the book He found the place where it was written, and this was His message, He was declaring who He was, The spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor, He hath sent Me to heal the broken heart and to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And He closed the book and gave it to the minister and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on Him and He began to say to them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." He said - I am the Messiah. They knew that was a Messianic scripture from Isaiah. He said - I am the fulfillment of Isaiah 61.

And what was their reaction? "And they all bore Him witness and wondered. And they said is not this Joseph's son," is He kidding? This is Joseph's son. And verse 24, He said, "Verily I say unto you, no prophet is accepted in His own country."

You know why Nazareth missed Christmas? Familiarity, familiarity. They knew Him so well He wasn't special. That is a deadly thing, people. And whenever I come across somebody who is not a Christian and I ask them if they've known of Christ and they say - Oh, yeah, I was raised in that. But I'm not a Christian. A fear grips my heart because familiarity strangles conviction.

You've heard it so many times, so many Christmas stories. So many Christmases, so many sermons, so many Bible lessons. Familiar breeds contempt. And so in Mark 6:6 the rather pensive tragic word, "He marveled because of their unbelief and He went round the villages teaching." He marveled at Nazareth's unbelief. And by the way, beloved, in Matthew 13:58 He says He did not many wonderful

works there because of their unbelief.

You know what happened in Luke chapter 4 at the end of the chapter? When Jesus got done with His message in the synagogue? It says they grabbed Him and they took Him out to the cliff on the edge of the town to throw Him off, to crush Him to death for blaspheming but He passed through their midst miraculously. They would kill Him. That's what I call missing Christmas.

Oh, the deadliness of familiarity with Christmas truth breeds a stony heart. I'm telling you, you'd better respond while your heart is soft or you'll heart will become hard and you won't have the opportunity to respond. Some of you have been raised in Christianity, raised in Christian homes and you've never responded to Jesus Christ and if you keep hardening your heart you never will.

Listen, there are lots of reasons why people miss Christmas. They miss it because of ignorant preoccupation. They miss it because of jealous fear. They miss it because of prideful indifference. They miss it because of religious ritual. They miss it because of false gods and they even miss it because of being so familiar with it. But behind all of those reasons is one basic reason--unbelief. They won't believe. They refuse to believe.

And so said Jesus, He came into the world and the world what? Received Him not. And John says - the world was made by Him and the world knew Him not. But then he says this, in the first chapter of John the 12th verse, "But," now mark this, this is the turning point, "But as many as," what? "received Him, to them gave He the power to become the sons of God even to them that believed on His name."

Whatever your excuse, whatever the reason you've been missing Christmas if you receive Christ and believe on Him Christmas will become a reality in your life. It can happen today. That's between you and God. Let's pray.

Father, we have to think that the real Scrooges of this world are not the people who miss the joy of giving but the people who miss the giving of joy that comes in receiving Christ. And so we pray right now for those here who have not received Christ, who have not believed. Oh, God, may this be the day they open their hearts.

While your heads are bowed for just a closing moment, you can reverse the whole of your life in one simple prayer of genuine faith. All that is really necessary is for you and your heart to say - Lord, I believe and I receive You. With all of my misunderstandings, with all of the questions I believe like the man who said - Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. In your heart just say - Christ, I receive You, take over my life, forgive my sin, be my Savior. And in so doing Christ is born in you and that's what Christmas really is.

Oh, Father, I pray that You'll bring those that need to come and that You'll touch the hearts of those who need to put their faith in You and receive Christ this day and all of this we pray for Your glory that Christmas may be what it is in reality, God becoming human flesh to save sinners. We pray, Father, that this might be a Christmas of salvation for many. And now dismiss us, Lord, not from Your presence nor from fellowship, nor from obedience to Your word but just from this place to take the living Christ out into the world. Bring us together tonight again with hearts ready to praise You and we'll thank You in Christ's name. And everyone said--Amen. God bless you.

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