

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Christmas Intruder

Scripture: Hebrews 1:3; Philippians 2:5–8

Code: B131220

In 2011 Christmas fell on a Sunday, and several churches canceled their church services because they didn't want to interrupt Christmas. What a bizarre idea—not wanting to impose the worship of Jesus Christ on the day we celebrate His birth!

It is, however, an even greater paradox that another figure has been allowed to intrude on many Christmas celebrations every year. He is everywhere at this time of the year, and far more prevalent than any representation of Jesus Christ.

There is even a “hymn” dedicated to this intruder—one that explains his “theology.” And we all know the lyrics, as do our children:

*You better watch out
You better not cry
You better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town*

Yes, Santa Claus is nothing more than a popular fairy tale. And yet he dominates the scene every year at Christmas.

What is remarkable about Santa is that his supposed power is eerily similar to God's. He's a transcendent being, not limited by the physical laws of this world. He can fly around the entire planet in a single night, stopping at every house along the way. And he's surrounded by other heavenly beings that likewise aren't subject to the constraints placed on the rest of creation. Santa is also omnipresent—*he sees you when you're sleeping*. He's omniscient—*he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake*.

The mythological Santa operates in a paradigm of benevolent promises and benign threats. If you're good, you'll get gifts. If you're bad, you won't. But, really, aren't we left with the sense that *everyone* is rewarded with a gift, and any naughtiness is forgiven with a wink of Santa's eye?

So not only does Santa fail to tell the truth, he's not consistent within his own system of works righteousness. He makes threats but doesn't follow through on them. Theologically, Santa Claus is a universalist. Ultimately everyone receives his favor.

Put simply, Santa is a *fictional* heavenly being of questionable character—he doesn't tell the truth, makes empty threats, demands good works, rewards the disobedient, and only shows up once a year. Those traits fall far short of the true God who only speaks truth, keeps all His promises, judges those who reject Him, gives salvation by grace through faith and not by works, and is always present.

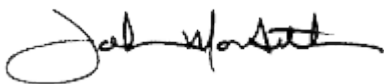
One of the saddest ironies about Christmas is that many think of Christ, not Santa Claus, as an unwelcome intruder. Not only does Santa's long and dark shadow obscure the true message of Christmas, even the familiar nativity scene freezes time and locks in many minds the image of Christ as a helpless newborn, and nothing more.

But the babe in the manger grew up—He is no longer an “infant, tender and mild.” He is Jesus the Messiah, God incarnate, the revelation of God's glory and His very image (Hebrews 1:3). The birth of Christ was the greatest condescension the world has ever known (Philippians 2:5–8), and His thirty-three years of human existence fulfilled all of God's demands for sinless perfection on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus took on a body of human flesh so that He might bear in that body the punishment that sinners like us rightly deserved (1 Peter 2:24).

Unlike Santa's, the Lord's favor does not depend on our righteousness (Ephesians 2:1-9). Through His life and death, Christ made possible the greatest of gifts—eternal life (Romans 6:23)—given by His grace alone. And the good news of God's gift is the sum of the Christmas message.

I'm not advocating for Santa's complete expulsion, but let's be sure to keep him where he belongs: with the other fictional characters of childhood whimsy. Don't surrender to him any territory or focus that rightly belongs to Christ. And this year, as you prepare for your own Christmas celebration, let the words of another hymn reverberate in your heart:

*O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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