

“A ‘DICKENS’ OF A CHRISTMAS (#2): THE ‘BUSINESS’ OF HUMANITY”

(Micah 6:6-8; Luke 1:46-53)

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**[PROPS NEEDED: ”A CHRISTMAS CAROL” Video-Clip]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-17-23]

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(Micah 6:6-8 = Advent Wreath Text read previously)

1. [11am ONLY... Read Text: Luke 1:46-53 and Pray.]
2. [WATCH VIDEO (Ghost of Christmas Present Montage) <sup>1</sup> --Time: 3:19...]

A--Two Sundays ago, we began a new series called “A ‘Dickens’ Of A Christmas” in which we’re relating Charles Dickens’ classic *A Christmas Carol* to the biblical Christmas story, and what we can learn about both life and faith from these.

B--Today, as we watched this montage of highlights from Scrooge's encounter with the “Ghost of Christmas Present,” I'm reminded of several important lessons.

3. First, in his own encounter with this ghost, Scrooge learns that **Happiness can't be Bought, but is Found in our Relationships**, both with other human beings & with God.

A--Remember that in this encounter, Scrooge is surprised to discover that those who are “poor” in *material* things were NOT necessarily “poor” in joy or happiness.

1--He sees needy families (like that of his own clerk Bob Cratchit) enjoying the Christmas holidays *in spite of* their great poverty, and wonders at the “riches” of their home which seem to have *nothing* to do with their financial situation.

2--In the course of this visit, the “poverty” of Scrooge’s own cold, selfish heart is uncovered, and he slowly begins to understand that gold and silver are not the true sources of value and happiness ... but that *people* are!

B--Well, like Scrooge, there are those of us today who sometimes think (or at least *act* as if) happiness is found in what we *own* -- that *possessions* bring contentment in life.

1--This is certainly the message of our consumer-oriented society:

- (a) “*Buy this, & you’ll be happy! Buy that & you’ll be content!*”
- (b) ...A bigger house, a nicer car, a larger large-screen TV, a newer smart phone, a bigger diamond on our ring -- these, we think, are what happiness is all about.

2--Yet, when we receive that which we think is the “ultimate” gift, many times we find that it’s not enough -- we want more; we’re still empty inside. <sup>2</sup>

3--Like Scrooge, you see, many of us still need to learn that true happiness is not found in the *gifts* that lie under our Christmas tree, but in the *relationships* that we have with one another and with God.

4--Someone once said that at Christmas we should “*Give the gift that money can’t buy -- ourselves; after all, that’s what God did!*”<sup>3</sup>

C--The Cratchit family understood this; And Mary (the mother of Jesus) understood it, as well -- even though she was just a poor peasant girl with few material possessions, in today’s 2nd scripture from Luke 1, we find her singing...

[**9am Service ONLY, read...** CEB, Vss 46-53...:

“46 Mary said, “*With all my heart I glorify the Lord! 47 In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. 48 He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored 49 because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. 50 He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. 51 He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. 52 He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.*”]

D--In her preparation for the first Christmas, you see, Mary knew that happiness was not found in *things*, but *here* [POINT TO MY HEART]... what’s in our *hearts* -- to know that true contentment and joy in life can’t be *bought*, but is found only in our *relationships* both with God and with others.

4. The second lesson Scrooge learns from the Ghost of Christmas Present is that **Salvation is Integrally Tied to Charity** -- to how well we look after the needs of others.

A--Remember from the video clip that at the end of his visit with Scrooge, the aging Ghost of Christmas Present pulls back his robe to reveal two emaciated children: a girl representing “Want”; and a boy representing “Ignorance” with the word “*doom*” on his forehead.

1--Well, Charles Dickens wrote this story in 1843, during the height of England’s Industrial Revolution.

2--And since the lower classes of that day were mostly illiterate, he wrote his stories for the middle and upper classes, hoping that his *entertainment* would also reach their *hearts* with important *social* messages.

3--In this scene we find one such message, for those were the days where children were being exploited in England’s industrial mines and factories.<sup>4</sup>

4--So, with this boy and girl, Dickens was saying, “*You rich who can read my story ignore the poor children around you at your own peril, because their life condition will spell “DOOM” for you, unless you do something about it!*”

B--And Dickens was right -- the true meaning of Christmas has something very much to do with the poverty that these children represent.

1--Remember that Jesus' parents (Mary and Joseph) would have been among the poor, illiterate, working class people that Scrooge despised so much.

2--Who knows? Confronted with the holy family in Bethlehem, perhaps Scrooge might have said of Mary and Joseph, "*If they've no place to go, then they'd better die and decrease the surplus population.*"

5. But the sad truth, of course, is that most of us react no better today.

A--We see the poor alongside the road in Atlanta or even right here in Newnan, and we lock our car doors to try to avoid them.

1--Or we hear about the poor in some other part of the world & think "how sad."

2--But someone once wrote, "*To feel sorry for the needy is not the mark of a Christian. To help them IS.*" <sup>5</sup>

3--Just last week, I encountered a family right next door at the exit of the Publix parking lot, holding up a sign, asking for food and help, and I drove on past. But their need stuck with me, and so I drove back to Publix, bought them a gift card, and gave it to them on my way out the second time.

B--In today's Micah 6 scripture (that you heard during the lighting of the Advent wreath)

we're told that what pleases God most is *not* our good intentions or pious rituals, but our *actions* of compassion and justice on behalf of others. Listen to its words again...

1--Verses 6-8: "*With what should I approach the Lord and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.*" <sup>6</sup>

2--We're reminded here, you see, that Christian faith is *not* just about what we *believe*, but also about what we *do*.

3--It's about *us* investing *our* lives in the lives of people who're hurting & in need who can do absolutely *nothing* for us in return (except, perhaps save our soul!). <sup>7</sup>

--II--

6. Now, from these two lessons about the importance of relationships and charity, do we see the common theme/message that ties them both *together*?

A--If you don't get anything else out of what I say today, get this: ...**Christmas is not about US. It's about OTHERS**

B--Let me read to you from the original words of Dickens' story, how the ghost of Scrooge's former business partner Jacob Marley explained it:

*"It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men and travel far and wide... [doing good]."* Scrooge answers, *"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob. Business!"* cried the Ghost, wringing his hands again. *"Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business.... Why did I walk through the crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode?"* <sup>8</sup>

C--You see, the story of Christmas reminds us that we as human beings were created for mutual love for and with each other -- in the words of today's title, the "*Business of Humanity*" is... EACH OTHER!

1--We're created to have the kind of love which, according to Saint Augustine, *"...has hands to help others,...feet to hasten to the poor and needy,... eyes to see misery and want,... [and] ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of [people]...."* <sup>9</sup>

2--We're created to have the kind of love that (as another put it) *"treats other people as more important than [ourselves]."* <sup>10</sup>

D--After all, that's what the first Christmas was all about: ...God so loved *us* that he put *us* first, even before himself. <sup>11</sup>

1--He loved us enough to invest himself in us -- by becoming one of us and showing us what true life is really all about.

2--And that's what we're called to do for each other, as well -- to invest *our* lives in the lives of others! <sup>12</sup>

7. So, how are you investing yourself in the lives of others this holiday season?

A--Did you complete a box for Operation Christmas Child to help needy world children? or buy gifts for one of our needy local children or senior adults through our recent Angel Wings ministry collection?

B--Or are you participating in our Advent Blessing box ministry by taking a box and filling it with the requested items for local needy families? or maybe you're helping someone in your neighborhood or at work or school in a personal way?

C--What you do, these actions can remind us (as today's stories do) that the true riches of Christmas are *not* found in a selfish focus upon *ourselves*, but in the extravagant investment of love and compassion in the lives of *others*.

8. [PRAYER: “*Lord, we confess that too often not only at Christmas but the whole year through we’ve lived as if life centered around us and our own needs. But today you’ve reminded us that life, especially at Christmas, is not about us. It’s about you, and your call for us to do what you did by tending to the needs of our fellow humankind. It’s about us doing what you did by giving the gift that money can’t buy: the gift of ourselves. This season, give us your grace and courage to invest ourselves in the lives of others. In the name of the one who gave his all that we might have life, your son Jesus, Amen.*”]
9. [SUGGESTED CLOSING 11AM HYMN: UMH#242 “Love Came Down At Christmas”]

### **ENDNOTES:**

- <sup>1</sup> The montage includes three scenes of Scrooge with the Ghost of Christmas Present: the Ghost sprinkling/blessing the poor; the Cratchit home celebration; and the boy and girl children of the Ghost (“Want” & “Ignorance”).
- <sup>2</sup> I once heard an excellent story of a father of a very wealthy family who took his son on a trip around his county with the purpose of showing him how poor people can be. The father pointed out poor families and their homes along the way. And after they got back home, the father asked his son, “*Son, what did you learn from this trip about how poor people can be?*” The son answered, “*Well, I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that’s 100 ft. long, and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon.... We have servants who serve us, and they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.*” At this, the boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, “*Thanks Dad for showing me how poor we are.*”
- <sup>3</sup> Douglas Rumford, “The Gift Money Can’t Buy,” From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B75. “*The joy of brightening other lives, bearing each others’ burdens, easing others’ loads and supplanting empty hearts and lives with [the] generous gift [of ourselves] becomes for us the magic of Christmas*” (W.C. Jones, cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration , p. B79).
- <sup>4</sup> England’s “Child Labor Laws” were even harsh by today’s standards: an 11-year-old child couldn’t work more than 72 hrs/week, and a 9-year old child couldn’t work more than 48 hrs/week. The result was an average lifespan for working children of only 25 years.
- <sup>5</sup> Vern McLellan, The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs and Wacky Wit (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996).
- <sup>6</sup> “[*God’s*] freedom from bias does not mean that he maintains neutrality in the struggle for justice. He is indeed on the side of the poor! The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history casting down the rich and exalting the poor because frequently the rich are wealthy precisely because they have oppressed the poor or have neglected to aid the needy. God also sides with the poor because of their special vulnerability” (Ronald J. Sider, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992) Entry #6630.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that I am NOT saying or implying that we somehow *earn* salvation by the *doing* of acts of charity -- this is not what the Bible calls “works righteousness.” Instead, our works and actions of charity and help to others are a *response to* and a *mark of* the authentic salvation we already possess. As such, those who have salvation *will* by definition engage in such acts. One poet explained it this way:

*“Somehow, not only for Christmas, but all the long year through  
The joy that you give to others is the joy that comes back to you.  
And the more you spend in blessing the poor and lonely and sad,  
The more of your heart’s possessing returns to you glad.”*

(John Greenleaf Whittier, cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration , p. B80).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Stories (New York: Signet Classics, Penguin Group Books, 1984), pp. 49 & 51.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #7334.

<sup>10</sup> Ron Jackson, “Christmas Is For People,” From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B76.

<sup>11</sup> John 3:16: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*” Colossians 3:12-14 also describes this kind of love: *“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”*

<sup>12</sup> One could even say that the problem with Christmas today is not that we give too much, but that we don’t give enough! We don’t know how to give enough of the *right* gifts to those who need them most!