

“So This Is Christmas”
By Chris Ulrich
Sunday, December 21st, 2014

I'd like to ask, Malcolm, if you could lead in prayer?

Malcolm: Let us bow our heads. God, we thank You for this opportunity to stand before You, to sit before You, to kneel before Your throne, Lord, God, that we might receive of You the Word that You have for us today, for our lives, for our spiritual enrichment, for the betterment of our lives on this earth before we meet You on Your throne. In Jesus' name we pray, anoint our brother, bless him and keep him. Amen.

Thank you Malcolm. You may be seated. Good to see everyone this morning. That was a nice, rousing rendition of, 'Joy to the World,' as we kick off the service, here. I have to ask a question before we get started here; I know this is going to be a tough one, but: Does anybody remember what the sun looks like? Okay, I know it's been a while; it's been a little dreary. The forecast isn't looking too good, either. But, I was just checking to make sure. For those of you keeping score at home, is it today or tomorrow is the first day of winter? Between today and tomorrow, okay, excellent, excellent. Well, the good thing is the days are going to start getting longer, starting tomorrow. One other thing, for those of you who were here last winter, I'm going to sing a quick song, here, and it ties into last year as well as this year:

Though the weather outside is frightful,
And the fire is so delightful,
Well, as long as you love me so,
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!

NO! Not! That is a not to that. Last year—at least we don't have 2 feet of snow and at least it's not -10. I've got to say that, okay, if it's cloudy, I can deal with that; thirty-five degrees, I can deal with that, but, after last year, I do not want to let it snow. I just want to let everybody know that, and I think we're all in this together.

I'm going to start this morning, I'm going to kind of work my way backwards a little bit. Most of us were here last week for Pastor Paine and Debbie's visit, and it was a tremendous time. I know that a lot of us that were here have talked about it, shared about it. I'm certainly not going to try and re-preach his message and I couldn't if I wanted to, either, but I believe we can all receive a blessing from that. I remember he asked a couple of questions to start, "How many would like to get something special for Christmas? How many would like to give something special for Christmas?" He shared a quick story about a customer that was at a Cracker Barrel restaurant here in the United States, and he didn't get too specific, but, one of the waitresses was down on her luck, and they basically bought her a new car. It was something that, I know Andy had asked different people to share, and some of those things are financially related. That's something that's a huge benefit; it's something about being able to give back. It's something that's important to people, I mean, we're not wanting to have to struggle all our lives, and I think that has a lot to do with being able to receive, but it is more blessed to give than to receive, like you shared, Terry, about you and Ken, just being able to give somebody a food-basket for them. Things like that are important.

He talked about Christmas as a child, and I think a lot of us could relate to a certain type of bike he was interested in getting. He'd saved up quite a bit for it, but, he was looking to buy a neighbor's bike,

down the street, and his dad was saying, “Well, what bike would you *really* like?” Just before he had enough money; just before he had planned on buying that other bike, his dad got him that special bike, the one that really meant something. But he shared some painful things; he shared that, the very next year, his Mom had been stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage and she was confined to a nursing home, not only that year, but for the rest of her life. I think that was a good ten years afterwards. It was something that he shared, that he remembers visiting his mom in the hospital, or in the nursing home, with his father, and, because the condition affected her memory, she said, “I don’t have a son Pete.” Really, it was something where he said that he felt sorry for himself; he got really down on himself, and I would have to say that I would feel the same, and I think we all can relate to that. But his dad pulled the car over, and he said, “You know what? just think about all those things to be thankful for. Think about it—you couldn’t have had a better mother than you did for the ten years that you had growing up. And, it was one of those things where it’s like, when he shared that, it hit home. I know that he has shared that testimony over the years; a lot of us are aware of that.

I know, as we enter into the Christmas season-- I’m not going to sing another song—I’m going to say I think a lot of us have heard the old song, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” but maybe that song just doesn’t do it for you. Maybe depression has set in and whatever else affects you and there’s no sugar-coating to alleviate the pain. One other point that Pastor Paine mentioned is that our Heavenly Father knows all our stories. He knows what we’re dealing with; He knows what our struggles are, and He knows what our victories are.

I told you I was going to work my way backwards, I know that when his wife, Debbie, came up here to share... There are two things that I want to share, and one is spiritual and one is not spiritual. So I’m going to start with the not spiritual part: She had mentioned that—now, she is originally from Arkansas, her family is from Arkansas, and they moved up here in the 70’s. I think she was thirteen, fourteen. Anyway, she shared that she tried so hard for many years to mask over her southern accent. As she was talking—now, I’ve known Debbie over 25 years and, when I first moved up here, she was in her early thirties, and it just dawned on me last week, if you listen to her mom, and if you listen to her sister Pam, who lives down in Virginia, they clearly—they both have a distinct southern accent. I mean, there’s no if’s and’s or but’s about it. I thought the funny thing about it was that—it’s a personal thing—and it was one of those things where it was like, because they had moved down to Virginia just a couple of years back, and it was something that she had tried to get over, for whatever reason—I think maybe it was just to be able to relate to people.

The other piece that she had shared, I know, Malcolm, you had been proud of your son, and, Rebecca, you were here, but Debbie mentioned that when Joseph X. shared a testimony, that she was just talking about how much it ministered to her, and how well-spoken he was. You know, you could tell that he listens in school, but he also listens in Sunday school. I’ve got to say that as I sat back there—I was an usher last week—how old is your son? thirteen? Wow, that’s impressive. Not to try to—we give glory to God, ultimately, but I’ve got to say that I respect the upbringing that you two are giving him. And there’s others here. Along with that, I’d like to segue into Bill and Becky. I know you’ve got to be proud parents; your son, Pat, taught a Bible study this past Wednesday at the It’s All Good coffee shop. Yeah, give the Lord a praise. Bob has been instrumental in keeping that going, and myself, and Bob, and Pat were out—this was maybe a month ago—and pat and some of his friends had seen a movie, “God’s Not Dead,” just the night before. So, he was sharing with us, and Bob was like, “Well, would you be interested in teaching a study about that?” He was like, “Sure.” So, he and I worked together, and I’ve got to say that when I was 17, I remember what I was doing, but it wasn’t teaching Bible studies. I can tell you that for sure. And, Malcolm and Rebecca, I can tell you, when I was 13, I wasn’t giving testimonies in front of a congregations; that’s for sure. So, hats off to those 2 young gentlemen. I appreciate their forthrightness, the willingness, their spirituality. That’s really what it’s all about, I mean, we’ve heard the expression that the youth are the church of tomorrow; they’re the church of today. We are, too; it’s not a competition

It's not a matter of, it's like, "Oh, we should be afraid. Oh, they're going to take over." It's not; God has something for everybody. God has something for everybody.

So, now I'm going back two weeks ago: Brother Parrish, who's in Baltimore today, rooting for the Ravens—I don't know why—but he preached a couple of weeks ago about the promise of Jesus. He talked about how when there is a promise there's a hope. He asked us, "Have you ever found yourself looking for something that's ahead?" That got me thinking about, especially as a kid, looking forward to summer; looking forward to being off from school, or looking forward to being off from school for Christmas, or being off from school for—you get it, you get it. But, I think that we've always got to have something to look forward to; there's always got to be anticipation. I think, even as Christians, I mean, ultimately, we look at our goal of eternal life, being with Christ, but there's things to look forward to in this lifetime. Whatever it might be to you personally. It might be different between two people; it might be different between me and whoever else it is. But, I know that one other thing that he shared from the heart was: his mom ran a day care center, several years ago, when she was still alive, He had been a Christian for a couple or three years, and he said that he was visiting them in Baltimore, and he had gone to pay her a visit this one day—and this was during the Christmas holidays—they were going to put on a play, or some kind of a presentation, and he said it was very unfancy. I mean, it was about as unglamorous as you could possible imagine, just the way he was describing it. But, he said as they got started, there was a part of the play, where one of the kids did the song, "Little Drummer Boy," and there's a line in the song, "I have no gift to bring, rum-pum-pum-pum." I think we've all heard it. I actually heard it on the radio as I was coming in this morning. God showed him at that moment that he was that little boy that has no gift to bring. It's something that God has that gift for us. God has something that's eternal.

So, where does that put us this morning? Sometimes we feel like we've got no gift to bring. We have our faith in God; you've got to trust in God. It's something that it's personal; we don't always know everybody's background, we don't know everybody's—whether they had a good, bad, or somewhere in-between. I'm going to touch on that a little more later.

Lamentations 3:22-26 *It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.*

So, there's a quietness and a hope in that salvation that we wait for. Sometimes, it might just seem like a struggle, and it might seem like, "How long is it going to take?" or, "How much longer are we going to have to put up with a world that seems to be getting worse?" I'm going to touch on that a little bit. The Bible says that iniquity shall abound and the love of any shall wax cold (Matthew 24:12). That Scripture is true throughout the year; that's not just a, "Well, when it's not the Christmas season..." There's a line in a show called, "Seinfeld," I think a lot of people have heard of it—it's a little bit older, but—t here's a scene in there where one of the guys is in the midst of writing a sitcom, and he gets a growth on his face—now, this is a comedy—so, he's all uptight about that, and, so he goes to his therapist—he does go to the doctor, but he also goes to his therapist—and he says to her, "God would never let me be successful, he'd kill me first!" She said, "I thought you didn't believe in God," and he said, "I do, for the bad things." It got me to thinking, sometimes, you know, if you're thinking that God only trying to get our attention during a catastrophic event, during a tsunami, during a terrorist attack, or some kind of conflict, or some kind of plague, or some kind of holocaust, or whatever else comes along, or tragedy... But, the thing is, God gets our attention through the hospitality of others. He gets our attention through the quietness of the morning. He gets our attention through that still, small voice. Something that ties in with what Parrish was sharing about hearing "A Little Drummer Boy," He gets our attention a lot of times

when we least expect it, and in ways that we could never possibly imagine. We know that it is His infinite love that draws us in.

1 John 4:6-9 *We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.*

I think we've all heard that the Christmas message and Jesus dying on the cross, or His birth, really—Andy mentioned about Easter-time, but it's all the same thing; we evaluate the life of Christ, and we understand that, okay, it's for everyone, and that's true. But more than anything, we've got to know that it's for you and me as individuals and that's what matters most. My first point today is that we have to maintain a personal walk with God that is for a lifetime. It's not just having some experience with God, or, it's not a shooting star, or, it's not a get-rich quick scheme, or anything like that where... Because as we go through life we're going to meet a lot of different people, but, you know, we're going to not meet a lot of people too. When you think about the populations, and people that are actually here, people that, if you just drive down to the city, you see car after car after car, and building after building after building, and just look around, you think that it could be a daunting view of, like okay, if we're up against the world. Well, we're not up against the world, if we're trusting in God. If we commit our works to God, if we trust in Him. I know that might sound a little callous, but what difference does it make whether we meet everybody else or not? I think we've all heard the expression, "Oh, you've got to meet this person," "You've got to meet her," "You've got to meet them," "You've got to meet this great talker," or whatever happens to be the case. It's like, "Why?" Why do I need to—and I'm not saying it's a matter of trying to be disrespectful, or combative, or argue with people, but I think a lot of it comes down to, okay, how many have ever run into a celebrity, whether it's just seeing them, or... Okay, I'm not actually going to—the point, really is that, I think, sometimes, they live inside I guess what you would call, you know, sort of a glass house. The truth of the matter is, we can't be envious. I think we have to be respectful as human beings, just in general. If I'm walking through the store, and I happen to come across some famous athlete, or newscaster, or whatever the case might be, it's like, okay. I think a lot of times, they see people as trying to, like, impose on them, which I think is the case. I think that's the case, but, the truth is, I'd rather know Jesus. I mean, it's not even close. It's not even close. When you stop to think about it, what do they really have to offer, or what does God have to offer us? And, in return, knowing God, what do we have to offer them? Well, we have a lot to offer. Don't get me wrong, I want to be friends and have 5,000 LinkedIn connections and 10,000 friends on Facebook, and about a million followers on Twitter. Oh yeah! But, after a while, it's like, okay, by far what's more important is having a personal relationship with God that will stand the test of time.

The second point is a nugget of gold from last week: We don't live in a peaceful world but we have peace in God. I'm going to break away from my notes a little bit; I thought about that this morning, because there's a few directions I want to go with this. There's a lot of problems in America, today, and it's like a powder keg just waiting to erupt. Here's a lot of racial problems; there was a killing in Ferguson, there was a killing of a guy in New York City. Yesterday, there were two cops that were just assassinated; I mean, the guy came up blew them away, and posted some things on-line... I want to back up: two weeks ago, Parrish had shared something that—it was funny the way he did, because he impersonated the guy from 'The Godfather.' How many knows the movie, 'The Godfather?' A lot of people; some people don't, okay. Well, it was set in the 1940's, and it was about the crime families of New York, and it was about, like, this hit, and that hit, and then, this family got hit, and then this family murdered this other family, and then they killed... It was just on and on and on, and the way Parrish was impersonating it, it was like,

you know, Don Corleone—I thought it was pretty good. But, the thing is, when does it stop? Here's the thing, in Christianity, I get that it's different; we're *in* the world, but we're not *of* the world. I get that there's problems, and it would be easy to say, "I'm white, I'm going to side with the whites," "I'm black, I'm going to side with the blacks," "I'm Latino, I'm going to side with the..." you know. But, I tell you this much, I've seen the protests signs that said, "Black lives matter." I'm here to tell you that black lives matter. Latino lives matter. Asian lives matter. White lives matter. American Indian lives matter. People that are racially mixed, their lives matter. Everybody's life matters, but, you know what? outside Christianity, who knows, really, what people are thinking? I get that there's a lot of different ideologies, or a lot of different agendas, or a lot of people that have the vengeance factor, or a lot of people that just want to keep people down, the oppressive factors, and it goes on and on and on. When is it going to stop? It's not going to stop; I'm going to tell you that right now. It's not going to stop. You look at the Middle East. The Palestinians hit the Israelis, the Israelis hit them; back and forth, back and forth. The problems in the Middle East go way, way long time ago. It goes back a long, long, long way, more than just, you know, the last ten years. I mean, you think about thousands of years, but, ultimately—some people say, "Oh, it's all about religion." No, it's not all about religion. It is all about people that oppose the truth of God. There is a lot of that. There is evil in the world. That is a fact. We're not going to sugarcoat it, or say, "No, no, everything's fine. Everything's great!" and put our head in the sand, "It's all going to go away, and it's all going to be beautiful." That's not going to happen. I'm not going to sit here and say it's going to keep worsening, but I am going to say, again, going back, iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold; that's Matthew chapter 24, when the disciples asked Christ about, "What are the signs of the end of the world?" I think it'd be easy to get riled up, I mean, I'm going to ask a question, here: At what point do we really just enjoy the joy of God? I'm asking that, and I'm hoping—I'm going to repeat that: At what point do we enjoy the joy of God? I'm not saying that I'm looking forward to it getting so bad that I end up in prison, or end up getting tortured... Anybody that thinks that, that's just ridiculous, but the truth is I want to trust in God in advance of anything really bad happening to have the power to deal with whatever happens. Things are going to come along, and who knows how much worse it can possibly get, but I imagine that it will, because the Bible does prophecy about it. I know that we can't have everything figured out, either, I mean, it's not as though we have to have everything planned out. There was a song I heard, years ago, and maybe you've heard something like this along your journey, too. It's "Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved." There is going to be problems in this world, and I think, you know, I know who I'm talking to; that we're aware of that. I'm not going to try to beat that into the ground, or to death. A lot of the trusting in God is about building up strength in God to be able to survive and to be able to prosper, and to be able to be strong in God

John 14:26-27 *But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

I want to go back, one more time, and reiterate something Pastor Paine alluded to last week; that we can have quite a wide spectrum of emotions for people at this time of year. I want to hit home a little bit more on the—sometimes we might think that we have a right to feel sorry for ourselves, to be bitter, to feel vengeful towards someone or something. I know I do, or just pick any emotion that breeds negativity and I think everyone understands that. I'm certainly not going to sit here and say I haven't been in that boat, but the question I have to ask us and I emphasize us (myself included) is do we really want to dwell there? I mean, I heard this—this was years ago—this was an interview with a father who lost his son in Viet Nam. The interviewer just said, "Are you bitter?" He was like, "You're blankety-blankety blank, I'm bitter!" and it was like—I don't know how long it was after that happened, but, let's just say it was ten

years, and it was the kind of thing where it's like, the Bible talks about having a root of bitterness whereby many be defiled (Hebrews 12:15). It's like, who is that bitterness directed at?

That movie that Pat taught that Bible study on, Wednesday night, 'God Is Not Dead,' there was an interesting part—and I'd recommend it; it's not all glitzy, or like a huge, huge budget, or... but it's good, it's clean, it's got good dialog... I'm not going to spoil it all by giving away the plot, but, it comes to find out,, there's this one part where this professor, he just, he's got a hatred towards God. But, it's like—and what did it result from? It could have been something that happened in his youth; it could have been something that happened last week. It could have been just a pile of circumstances that just accumulated over time, or feeling sorry for himself. I mean, I know, again, that's the kind of thing where it's like, if you feel like, "Well, I missed out on this. I don't have that. I wasn't able to get this job. I wasn't able to get that relationship," or whatever the case might be, but the thing that Pastor Paine's dad shared with him, "Be thankful. Be thankful for all those years that you had with your mom." Be thankful for still having a house. I know that sometimes we're dealing with something that's almost—maybe we're dealing with somebody that's lost their job; dealing with something that would be considered dire circumstances. But, that was the main part of the equation that his dad used to emphasize, to help get over that hurdle.

I know I've referred to last week's message a lot today; it's been kind of a revisit the blessing kind of recap. For those who weren't here last week I certainly hope that today has helped recreate the scene a little bit. For those that were here, I believe that a message like that puts meat on our bones and it sustains us. I mean, we have, you know, the bishop of our church, who has an anointing like that, that's something that—he's not going to be around forever. None of us are, but, I mean, he's sixty years old, now, and something like that, you have to look at, like, the passage of time. I mean, it happens; it's just the natural course of events in life, and I think it's good a lot of times to just appreciate people while they're still here instead of eulogizing them after they're gone. People appreciate that, too.

We're getting close to the end of this year and I'm also getting close to the end of this message. Another year over and a new one just begun. "So this is Christmas" that's actually the title of song. It's kind of a non-traditional song that came out maybe forty years ago. Another year over and a new one just begun. What do you want for Christmas this year? What do want to give for Christmas this year?

Isaiah 9:6-7 *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*

I know we used this verse quite a bit here this month, but it does bear repeating. Sort of like the gift that keeps on giving. I suppose most of us did receive gifts as children that, those memories are instilled in us. Honda motors started doing some commercials here, in the last month or so, that start something like, "Remember when you got Stretch Armstrong? or Remember when you got Strawberry Shortcake?" or Remember when you got me, Skeletor for Christmas?" And the whole reason behind that is—I don't drive a Honda but they're very effective commercials, in kind of charging our memories. I think the Christmas gift I remember getting was—does anybody remember Mattel Electronics Football? You, Mike? Good, because I've got one for you. The next year they came out with Mattel Electronics Football Part 2. I loved them! Part 2 you could pass, whereas the first one you couldn't. But, you know, those gifts are quite long gone. You'd probably have to or buy them on E-bay or Amazon or go to a yard sale if you wanted to find those. They don't sell them in stores anymore, I mean, we're going back quite a ways. I know that, you know, when I go to visit my folks, I'll look at old photo albums, and one thing I've noticed, speaking of football, me and my brother, we always had these different teams jerseys. Not just the Patriots, but the Chargers, the Saints, and just on and on, so, Mike—Mike always wears a different hat of

a different team every week. So, we don't really know what his affiliation is, but I just wanted to bring that up. Mike really does like the Patriots. But I think you know where I'm going, as I wrap this up. It doesn't really matter what our background is, where we're from, or how old we are, whether we had a great upbringing, or maybe not very enjoyable at all—I know some of you have shared those things—or maybe it was somewhere in between. It doesn't matter if we had a great upbringing, an unfortunate one, or probably somewhere in between. The gift of the message of Jesus Christ never grows old and it is the original gift that keeps on giving.

I want to thank you all for your attendance this morning; I appreciate everybody's attention. I look forward to what God has for us this next week, and next year. God bless you all, and Merry Christmas!

