

# A HANDS-OFF CHRISTMAS

## LUKE 9:57-58

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

When I was in preschool our family lived in a house with a floor furnace. It was a dangerous apparatus.

I'm glad these furnaces are no longer placed in new homes. Hot air blew through a vent in the middle of the hallway. The metal grill covering the vent got very hot.

You could burn your feet if you stepped on the grate.

My parents cautioned my brother and I to slow down when we walked down the hall. They didn't want one of us falling on the furnace and burning ourselves...

*But I was a little boy and this was Christmas AM!*

*I was so hyped up...* I was fixated on the gifts under the tree - especially, those with my name on them.

So as I ran down the hall, I got careless and tripped, and fell head-first onto the floor furnace. Thankfully, my hands caught my fall. I saved my face, but my palms were burned. You can still see a few scars to this day.

If I had slowed down and thought it through - *and put Christmas in perspective* - I couldn't keep my hands off that red-hot, metal grate. A **hands-off Christmas** would have saved me from much pain that year.

This Christmas I want to keep you and your family from getting burned. There is an aspect of Christmas in America - Christmas as celebrated in Western culture - that needs to be *hands-off* to true followers of Jesus.

Christmas tangibles - *like money, presents, parties, shopping, decorating, in fact, any man-made tradition* - can rob us of the season's spiritual significance.

What our hands grab can distract our hearts. *Christmas stuff can muffle the true Christmas spirit.*

Someone has pointed out that the same letters used to spell, "*Santa*," also spell, "*Satan*" - *same letters just a different arrangement...* That's why at Christmas, **priorities are everything!** Get your priorities out of whack, and Satan will dilute your holiday of much of its meaning. Be careful to have **a hands-off Christmas.**

In this morning's text a would-be disciple approaches Jesus, and wants to join His cause. He even makes the boast, "*Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.*"

Yet you get the impression Jesus discerns there's something disingenuous about this person's motive.

Perhaps the fellow saw Jesus' popularity, and extrapolated where it might lead? *If he stuck with Jesus, he could later share in His fame and fortune.*

Maybe this man assumed that anybody with miracle-working power was bound to go places, and he wanted to make sure he came along for the ride. Somehow the man saw Jesus as a rainbow ending at a pot of gold.

In Luke 9 we're not told of this man's exact motive, but whatever it was it gets challenged by Jesus.

Our Lord bursts the bubble of this wannabe follower, by saying, "**Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.**" Apparently, this man saw Jesus as a ticket to the top... *But Jesus wasn't headed that direction!*

Jesus says He doesn't even own a home. His name isn't on a lease. If He had applied for a mortgage, His credit app would've kicked back for lack of activity.

Foxes have dens - birds have nests - partridges for some reason stay in pear trees - and everybody knows there're reindeer stables at the North Pole... **but Jesus had nowhere on earth that He called home.**

In essence, Jesus was challenging this prospective disciple, "**If your priority is to be somebody, and go places in this world, you don't want to follow Me?**"

Remember, when Jesus was born His family couldn't get a room at the Econolodge. Joseph and Mary ended up bedding down for the night in a cold, damp cave that belonged to the cows, and goats, and chickens.

Even later, when this man comes to Jesus - *though Jesus' ministry is by now picking up steam* - His preferred form of housing hadn't changed. Rather than condos, Jesus still prefers roadsides and campfires.

When He slept at night - rather than snuggle up with a pillow - Jesus liked to rest His head on a rock where He could gaze to the heavens, and think of home.

Remember Jesus was *born in a cave*. He was *buried in a cave*. And I'd suggest He spent an awful lot of the time in-between *in countryside and shepherd's caves*.

By His own admission, Jesus stayed much of His ministry in whatever temporary housing He could find.

If you had followed Jesus from the first Christmas to the first Easter - from His birth until three days after His death - you would've gotten the impression this Man was ***just passing through***. This world was not His home... Jesus was even buried in a borrowed tomb!

Think of it, His grave was a weekend rental.

In one sense, Jesus was very attached to planet Earth. There was nothing aloof or distant about Him.

He was not a disengaged individual. In fact, He was so attached to the human plight, Jesus allowed people to nail His hands and feet to a wooden cross. *Yet in another sense, He lived His life in [a hands-off posture](#)!*

Even though the world's prosperity was there for the taking - Jesus never flirted with fame, or grabbed hold of wealth. Material success was never His goal.

*And the first Christmas was evidence...*

The eternal Son of God was the one person in human history that really could've picked His parents.

He could've been born with a silver spoon in His mouth - born to a privileged family. Instead, He chose working class kin from the rural region of Galilee.

A family with no health care coverage, and maternity benefits. Jesus was born in the squalor of poverty.

Of course the skeptic could say, “Yea, but Jesus did receive expensive gifts from the wise men. Gold, frankincense, myrrh - that’s a nice start.” But you fail to remember, these gifts were the currency Joseph use to finance his family’ s emergency flight into Egypt.

After the visit of the magi, Herod ordered the killing of the babies in Bethlehem. Suddenly, the holy family became refugees on the run. That little bit of gold and spice they received paid the cost for their exodus.

You could always say of Jesus... **He was never in it for the money.** *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."* **The attraction of Jesus was that He was in touch with heaven, and heaven was evident in Him.**

As we spoke last week, the eternal, Almighty God was **hands-on** in His dealings with humans, and with human need, through this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

But following Jesus also involved a **hands-off** approach to *material treasures, and worldly measures, and sinful pleasures...* Jesus challenged this wannabe disciple, *was he willing to live without earthly security?*

Was fellowship with the Savior - and a heavenly inheritance - enough to satisfy this man’s heart? Could he live with his **hands-off** the things of the world, and his **heart open** to God? *Can you and I live this way?*

After she turned 90, grandma found it too difficult to shop for Christmas. She was no longer up for the drive to the mall. She lacked the energy to battle the crowds.

And she felt out of touch with the items and brands her kids and grandkids considered cool. She no longer chose the good stuff. Her gifts were now failing to produce the “wow factor.” So one Christmas, this grandma approached her gift-giving differently...

She sent out Christmas cards to everyone on her shopping list, and inserted a check in the card. Her kids and grandkids, nephews and nieces - could shop for themselves, and purchase a gift they'd really enjoy.

Inside each card she wrote, “Buy your own present.” Grandma even mailed her Christmas cards early.

That first year, grandma thoroughly enjoyed her Christmas. Without all the typical shopping hassles her celebration was much more relaxed and uncluttered.

She sailed through the holidays and enjoyed the time with her family. But when Christmas was over she was cleaning her desk when suddenly she was struck with horror! Under a stack of papers she found *the checks - the gifts she forgot to insert into the Christmas cards.*

Grandma had sent out the message, “Buy your own present,” without sending along any money... Her family thought *they had a grandma with an attitude!*

Let me say up front... **I don't have an attitude.**

I'm not against giving and exchanging Christmas gifts. A *hands-off Christmas* isn't a campaign against shopping, or an assault on poor Santa Claus.

My name isn't Pastor Scrooge! *Just like you, I like to unwrap Christmas presents on Christmas morning.*

But here's my assertion, and I think you'll agree, **Christmas should be about more than giving gifts!**

Ask yourself this question, *"What would your Christmas celebration look like this year if the custom of exchanging gifts didn't exist? What would be left of your Christmas? How would Christmas be different?"*

Let's just pretend... Let's play the *what-if* game...

What if this Christmas there were *no gift lists and bargain hunting - no Black Friday shopping - no late night gift wrapping marathons - no kid's letters to Santa Claus - no Christmas mornings around the tree, reading names off labels, and passing out presents?*

We all enjoy giving gifts to folks we love... *but what if this year, that custom, and all that goes with it, simply disappeared?* If presents were no longer present, **how much of your Christmas celebration would remain?**

Would your Christmas season be gutted or barely affected? If *"thoroughly gutted"* were 10, and *"barely affected"* a 1... where would your Christmas rank?

Again, let me reiterate, this sermon is not an attack on gift-giving! I'm not the Grinch stealing Christmas.

In fact, if you've gone ahead and purchased your pastor a nice Christmas present... *there's surely no need to take it back!* Unless of course, it's not my size.

I say, go ahead and bless your pastor! I believe gift-giving is a legitimate part of a Merry Christmas.

How can we celebrate God's greatest gift to humankind - the gift of His only Son, Jesus - without wanting to give gifts to the people we love? Even the wise men responded to *God's gift by giving gifts...*

Gift-giving is a wonderful practice... *but gift-giving can be like kudzu!* And if you're from the South you're familiar with kudzu. It's that leafy vine that's taken over thousands of acres. It covers 7 million southern acres.

Kudzu is native to Japan and China, but the southern climate is perfect for its growth. In the summer, it can grow a foot a day. Kudzu can grow 60 feet a year. It'll cover trees, power poles, cars, sheds, even houses.

This is why southerners close their windows at night... to keep out the invading Kudzu. The spread of the Kudzu plant is almost impossible to contain.

Scientists have found one weed killer that actually... *accelerates its growth.* All the others have no effect.

To kill the weed, the Alabama branch of the US Forest Service recommends repeated herbicide treatments for *up to 10 years... a whole decade!* My point is, **kudzu tends to overwhelm everything else.**

*And so can gift-giving at Christmas time...*



The practice can be all-consuming... for the children who open the gifts... and for the parent who buy, and wrap, and charge, *and eventually pay for the gifts...*

Most Americans spend at Christmas time the way the New York Yankees establish their roster for the next baseball season... *they spend with no restraint.*

According to the National Retail Federation, it's estimated that in 2018 the average US citizen will spend \$885 on Christmas gifts - and most of the bill will be paid with credit cards. It takes the average American five months to pay off their Christmas debt.

Every year we go from "Jingle Bells to juggling bills."

That's why I encourage young couples especially, to think through how they want to celebrate Christmas, when the kids are still tots - before habits form.

A couple of Christmases ago I asked a little boy in our church (*he was probably your son!*) if he expected to get anything for Christmas. He said, "Yes, I think so."

I asked him if he'd give **me** his presents. After mulling it over for a second, he said, "*Only the clothes.*"

It doesn't take long for a child to figure out the most coveted gifts! Expectations form quickly. Changing those expectations are as difficult as killing kudzu.

Here's my point, our obsession *with the perfect gift* or *enough gifts* can overshadow all the other aspects of our Christmas. It overwhelms not just my *finances*, but my *focus*. *The mall not the manger is the center...*

*We buy, when we could bless...*  
*We shop, when we could sing...*  
*We wrap, when we could worship...*  
*We hurry up, when we could slow it down...*  
*We think, when we could thank...*  
*We price, when we could pray...*  
*We ponder gifts, when we could praise God...*  
*We picture what we're getting, when we could be praising God for what we've gotten. It's tragic indeed! A need for funds can even drown out a love for friends.*

In 2008, an employee at a Long Island, NY Walmart, Jdimytai Damour, was trampled by Black Friday shoppers. A mob of frenzied buyers tore the door of the store off its hinges and bum-rushed the employee.

Police officers who tried to administer CPR on Jdimytai were stepped on by the crowd. It was brutal.

Early that morning 2000 shoppers had gathered outside in the pre-dawn darkness. As the clock ticked down to the 5 AM Opening, the crowd started to chant, "Push the doors in... Push the doors in..." One witness said the shoppers acted like 'savages.'

Later when buyers were told to leave the store - *that an employee had died* - the witness reported, "They just kept shopping." Imagine, a man was trampled to death so shoppers could save \$20 on a flat screen TV.

But this kind of episode is not unusual. It happens every year. I heard of a 60 year old Kentucky woman who was trampled by a rush of crazed shoppers.

She suffered a black eye, bruises, and broken ribs.

She went shopping for a good deal - afterwards she was in a good deal of pain. *Folks get carried away...*

The daughter of the Kentucky victim made the comment, "I've always heard people get kinda hateful and nasty during those times... To think they would push and shove to buy something is really incredible."

Yet people have been pushing and shoving Jesus out of His own holiday for a long time now.

If we're not careful a simple loss of perspective can cause us to trample on *the real reason for the season*.

Hey, Christmas kudzu can grow over everything - *courtesy, decency, respect, kindness... even Jesus*.

It's sad, we celebrate the birth of the man who said, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*" - by decorating our houses with expensive ornaments, and showcasing a cavalcade of presents under our tree.

Again, I'm not against gift-giving and holiday cheer.

Yet in the midst of all the Christmas music, mirth, and materialism, I feel like the lone voice in the wilderness crying for us to beware of the consumerism that can choke out Christmas and its true meaning.

It reminds me of the Christmas play at the elementary school. To show the radiance of the newborn Babe a light bulb was installed in the manger.

The rest of the stage was dark to emphasize the brightness of Jesus. But the kid controlling the lights got confused. When it was time to kill the stage lights, everything went black - including the bulb in the manger. After a few seconds one of the shepherds shouted to the stagehand, “You switched off Jesus!”

And here’s my word to you... *don’t switch off Jesus!*

A **hands-off approach** to Christmas allows Jesus to shine brightly all throughout the holidays. Christians at Christmas should be more *spiritual* than *commercial*.

Well, with the time I have left, I want to give you three words that I think will help you and your family celebrate a **hands-off Christmas** this holiday season.

Here are three words full of important instruction... **Moderation... Magnification... and Manifestation...**

First, is a word that’s used so seldom today, most of us have probably forgotten its definition - it’s the term, **moderation**. The word “**moderation**” means “**restraint or temperance... to keep within reasonable limits.**”

I’m afraid moderation is a lost art in today’s society. Everywhere you look people are pushing the limits.

We live in an **extreme** culture. Folks are into indulging desires, stretching boundaries, and ignoring taboos. I’m sure, the modern vocabulary uses the term “*splurge*” far more often than it does “*moderation.*”

Today, we have *X-games* and *Extreme Makeovers*. The idea of a person *living within limits* is anathema.

Talk show host, Jay Leno, use to have a segment on *The Tonight Show* where he read humorous headlines from various advertisements. Here's an ad that a dentist ran during the Christmas holidays... It reads...

"After all, the gift of chewing is what the holidays are all about." Even a sarcastic Leno scoffed, "*That's right. Christmas is not about helping people less fortunate, it's about chewing.*" Yet sadly, for many people, Christmas **is** about consuming as much as is possible.

Here's a cartoon with a contemporary message. A couple happens to be Christmas shopping at the Electronics Warehouse - when the man tells his wife, "*I think what we really need is a splurge protector.*"

Think of it, *could the key to a truly merry Christmas be a moderate approach?* Rather than grabbing with our hands - keeping our **hands off**? Showing restraint with *our hands* can be a way of enlarging *our hearts!*

The one place in our English Bible where the word "**moderation**" occurs is in 1 Timothy 2:9-10. It appears during Paul's instructions to Christian women...

He says it's God's desire, "*that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works.*" In short, Christian women should dress mod, but modest.

As the old saying goes, "**Modest is hottest.**" Christians should adorn themselves "*with moderation.*"

Rather than come across flashy or gaudy - a virtuous woman should highlight her inner beauty - *her good works and godliness*... There's nothing wrong with a woman dressing fashionably. She can use make-up and sport hip clothes - she just won't go overboard.

*Gaudiness* is an affront to *godliness*. A woman who follows Jesus will emphasize the content of her heart.

And what applies to a Christian woman, even more so applies to the Bride of Christ, the Church at-large.

It's ok for us to hang some decorations, and give a few gifts, and have a pretty tree - as long as we realize God examines the inside. He measures our hearts.

Go ahead and participate in the peripheries - have a *ball* at the *mall* if you want - but you'll please God if you maintain some moderation and show restraint. *Wrap some presents, just don't you get wrapped up in it*...

In fact, you can't really celebrate Christmas *under the tree* until you've first celebrated it *in your heart*. The human heart is today's manger. It's in your heart and my heart that the life of Jesus is born all over again.

The second word I want you to give you that will help you keep a **hands-off Christmas** is **magnification**.

Magnify Jesus this Christmas season!

I once heard a pastor discussing our responsibility to **magnify** and **minify**... We need to magnify Jesus and minify ourselves. At first I didn't think "*minify*" or "*minification*" was even a word, but it is. It's an IT term.

“Minification is the process of removing unnecessary code or redundant data without effecting how the program functions.” It’s stripping away the add-ons, and cookies, and formatting that attaches over time.

And this is what needs to happen at Christmas!

We should minify - or strip away all the unnecessary, and return to what the season is about. As the pastor said, we need to *magnify* Jesus, and *minify* ourselves.

This is what John the Baptist told us when he said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” From that point onward in his ministry *Jesus was magnified or increased in importance, and John was minified or scaled back.* John’s concerns were redundant code.

This should be the case with Christmas. Increasingly so, it should be about getting Jesus out in front - and keeping me in the back... **Magnify Him. Minify me.**

If the truth were known a lot of our gift-giving isn’t about the recipient anyway, as much as it is about us, the giver. At times what we give - and how much - is a source of personal pride. We all like to give presents that impress. Who doesn’t like to give a gift, and then hear the recipient say “*wow!*” We end up the hero!

It’s so easy for our motivations to get cloudy at Christmas time. Even with our kids and grandkids...

We base our shopping not on what we can afford to give, or even want to give - often we’re governed by the fear of looking cheap! *What if their friends get more than they do? Or*

*what if the other grandparents out-give us? Shady motives can dictate our giving...*

We all need to be reminded that Christmas is really about *magnifying Jesus* and *minifying ourselves*.

If your goal is to be THE STAR at Christmas... then recall that a star is what God used to point the wise men to Jesus. *Real stars point people to Jesus!*

I'm afraid that in too many Christian homes, jolly ole Saint Nick gets more stage time than the Savior. The real Saint Nick would be appalled at what's happened.

The historical Nicholas was born in 280 AD.

He lived a life of sacrifice, and generosity, and faithfulness. For a time, the Roman Emperor Diocletian imprisoned Nicholas for his faith in his Lord Jesus.

Stories abound of Nicholas' compassion toward the poor. He would disguise himself and go into the city to give gifts to poor kids. When he died in 314 AD he had given away everything his rich parents had left him.

There's a reason more churches in the world are named after St. Nicholas than any other person. The original St. Nick *magnified Jesus* and *minified himself*.

Isn't it odd that modern authors have tried to reverse this reality - *they magnify St. Nick* and *minify Jesus*.

The poet Clement More gave Nicholas a red nose and eight reindeer... Illustrator Thomas Nast drew him big and fat, and dressed him in a red suit... Others have given him funny names like Kris Kringle and Santa Claus... They've even



ascribed to him attributes that belong only to God, “He sees you when you’re sleeping... He knows if you’ve been bad or good...”

Trust me, the real Saint Nicholas would never tolerate what they’ve done to him. His whole life was spent *magnifying His Lord Jesus!*... This Christmas why don’t we **minify** the trimmings of Christmas - and **magnify** THE Savior that was laid in the manger...

The last word I’ll give you to help us with a **hands-off Christmas** is a theological term: **manifestation**. A **manifestation** is a spiritual unveiling - God’s revelation.

And the first Christmas was full of supernatural manifestations... *an angel visited Mary - an angel appeared to Joseph - a heavenly host of angels proclaimed the birth of Jesus to shepherds - again an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt - and God even hung a star in the sky as a signal to the eastern magi...*

The first Christmas was a massive unveiling... It was an unprecedented roll out of divine revelation.

The first Christmas, *and in a sense every Christmas since*, is about God in heaven leaning over the rail of His heavenly ship watching a lost humanity drown in an ocean of sin... And He can’t just watch us, He dove into the choppy, icy waters wearing no life preserver...

He came in full human form - in skin tight humanity. And through this man, His Son Jesus, God has spent the last 2000 years plucking people out of the surf.

Christmas is all about God's intervention in human affairs. It's about a God who refused to sit on the sidelines - a God Who involves Himself in our world. His Christmas title, "Emmanuel," means "God with us."

For the shepherds and wise men - for Joseph, and Simeon, and Anna - Christmas was about meeting God up-close and personal... and I believe God still reveals Himself to folks who love Him, and desire to know Him, and take time to seek Him... especially at Christmas...

For the young girl, Mary, Christmas was about meeting God in a most unusual way - the Spirit of God overshadowed her, and birthed His Son in her virgin womb... Perhaps God wants to hover over you this Christmas - *to warm your heart - empower your soul - renew your mind - heal your wounds - ease your pain.*

What if God wanted to meet you in a very special way this Christmas? *Would your hands be busy doing other stuff - busy stuff? Would your hands be so wrapped up with wrapping, or whatever... that you'd forfeit His manifestation? Imagine, missing out on God Himself because of a half-price sale at Wal-Mart!*

God revealed Himself in the person of Jesus, and today Jesus lives to unveil God to eyes of faith.

Christmas is about new possibilities.

Listen to this poem by an unknown author... "More light than we can learn, more wealth than we can treasure, more love than we can earn, more peace than we can measure - *because one Child is born.*"

A child was born, and with Him new God-possibilities begin. A new world opens to those who follow Jesus!

Here's how you handle Christmas. Remember three words: *moderation*, *magnification*, and *manifestation*...

**Moderation:** Show some restraint this Christmas. Live within your limits. You'll find those limits are more protective than punitive. Don't set bad precedents, and get sucked into an emphasis you'll regret. Christmas is far more *a holy day*; than it is just *a holiday*.

**Magnification:** *Magnify Jesus and minify yourself.* Where are your eyes fixed? Like the star in the East, this Christmas be a light that points people to Jesus.

**Manifestation:** True Christmas celebration is in the heart, for that's where we meet Jesus. And He wants to reveal Himself to you. This Christmas let God turn your heart into a manger, and meet Jesus in a fresh way.

Here's my suggestion: If you want this year to be you and your family's best Christmas ever... *hands down*... then make it more of **a hands-off Christmas!**