

A HANDS-OUT CHRISTMAS

MATTHEW 10:7-8

And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons.

Freely you have received, freely give...

For those of us who live in Atlanta and North Georgia there are lots of ways to celebrate Christmas...

You can drive to Lake Lanier and take in the [Magical Nights of Light](#). You'll find 7 miles of illuminated characters and millions of twinkling lights. But the sensory overload will cost - a weekend carload is \$53.

And if you choose to hang out at the ice skating rink, or roast a S'more on the fire pit, add another \$24.99.

Closer to home, you can take in [A Stone Mountain Christmas](#). Along with elaborate light exhibits there's the Polar Express 4D movie - Christmas shows, a Christmas parade, Snow Mountain, and a Lazar show.

But again, Stone Mountain charges \$34.95 a head.

If you like the sounds of Christmas you can visit the [Atlanta Symphony Orchestra](#). They host nightly concerts during the Christmas season. From "*Handel's Messiah*" to "*A Very Merry Christmas*" featuring the famous Yale University ensemble, the Whiffenpoofs.

The ASO has something for everyone. But a night at the symphony is steep... tickets run from \$29 to \$69.

If this Christmas you'd like to take in a performance of the famous ballet, [The Nutcracker](#), the metro Atlanta area provides several options at different price points...

The *Atlanta Ballet's* performs at the Fox Theater where tickets run from \$64 to \$165. If you'd like to save money the *Gwinnett Ballet's* version is a value at \$31.

Callaway Gardens offers a grand Christmas tradition. [Fantasy in Lights](#) is ranked by National Geographic in the Top Ten Christmas light displays in the world.

As you travel through the [Magical Christmas Garden](#) and [Snowflake Valley](#) you'll see 8 million twinklers, on 731 miles of string. There're enough lights at Calloway Gardens to decorate 26,600 Christmas trees. But tickets are costly: \$35 for an adult - \$17.50 for children.

As you can see, an Atlanta family can have lots and lots of fun at Christmas time, but you've probably noticed a common theme... *It will be expensive fun!*

For a family of four to take in all the events I've mentioned expect to spend over \$1000 in admission fees alone. *A Christmas celebration can be costly...*

And here's the irony, we spend money on Christmas *tickets*, and *we're charged for Christmas celebrations*, and *there's a fee to participate in Christmas activities...*

While the first Christmas - which was the best Christmas ever - was absolutely free of charge!

What has happened to Christmas?

In Matthew 10 Jesus sends His disciples out two by two... And He tells them, preach the kingdom, heal the sick, work miracles, cast out devils, bring the dead to life... *and when you're done... charge nothing for it!*

“Freely you have received, freely give.”

Sadly, for some churches and ministries today it's the *charging nothing* that becomes the real miracle.

Not once did our Lord ever use His power to pad His pockets. Everything Jesus did was free of charge.

No one ever paid Jesus for services rendered. He never hired Himself out, or solicited funds, or charged an appearance fee, or even mailed out an invoice.

Jesus gave to people freely...

What if Jesus had opened up a practice... hung up a shingle, “Healer for hire... Savior at your service... Forgiveness for a fee...” He would've made a fortune. People would've flocked to buy His miracle power.

Yet *“per gratis”* was Jesus' modus operandi.

Everywhere Jesus went, and all that He did - it was an expression of God's grace. Every miracle was *a divine handout*. His hands were always reaching out.

And that was especially true with the first Christmas God orchestrated... It too included quite a light display.

God hung a spotlight over Bethlehem, and specifically a manger. A star in the sky guided the wise men hundreds of miles to worship the infant King.

Imagine the bulbs and string that required!

And the angels' announcement to the shepherds...

I don't care how good the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra does Handel's Messiah it'll still be a second rate show compared to the concert the heavenly host gave the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem.

And that doesn't even mention the main attraction...

The Almighty God fills the heavens. He plants His left foot on one side of the universe, and His right foot on the opposite side of the universe - at least 40 billion light-years apart, *and He doesn't even have to stretch.*

Yet this same massive God reduces Himself to a human zygote - nestles into the uterine wall of a virgin girl - and grows into a baby ready to be born...

That my friends, is a far more impressive performance than any holiday lazar show, or S'mores on a fire pit... All the merriment of Christmas' present pale in comparison to the miracle of the first Christmas.

God pulled out all the stops, and He charged those He invited to the manger *nothing* to behold the miracle.

The first Christmas was free indeed! **There was no turnstile at the stable's entrance... When the shepherds arrived no one asked them for a ticket... The heavenly host didn't count up the gate receipts...**

The first Christmas... *after all its wonder and world-changing implications were tallied...* was given freely!

And think of all the Christmases since - even your own personal Christmases. I'm sure we've all had some Christmases that were better than others, but I think most of us would admit some of our fondest memories revolve around the Christmas season.

Christmas is a bright spot in an otherwise dreary winter. It's often a happy time - a family time - when even a dysfunctional tribe tends to come together.

Before Charles Dickens wrote his famous story, "*A Christmas Carol*," he said this about the Christmas season. "Christmas is a good time - a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time. The only time I know of when men and women open their shut-up hearts freely, and think of people below them as if they were fellow passengers to the grave... Though Christmas has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!" *Christmas does us all some good, even those who aren't the most ardent worshippers.*

Christmas brings us back to what's important in life.

It reminds us of the value of relationships, and of the ideals God wants us to live by throughout the year.

At Christmas we cease our obsession with winning and warring. We put away ledgers, turn-off calendars, power down, and focus on people. *We give, not take.*

Christmas, if only for a day, forces us to step off life's treadmill. *Christmas is a season to be jolly.* It's a magical time of year... **especially** if you're a Christian!

The Christ-Child's Christmas journey - from throne in heaven to the filth and fodder of a Bethlehem barn - is a reminder of just how far God is willing to go to reveal His love, and patch our wounds, and pardon our sin...

Talk about hands-out... could God have reached any farther? Our God is not a distant - way off, up there, somewhere kind of God. He really does care - and He cares enough to experience life from our perspective.

Former New York Yankee manager Joe Torre was once asked if managing baseball couldn't be done better from above the playing field - from a seat in the press box. You'd think a higher and more panoramic view would give a manager a clearer perspective?

But Torre said he would preferred to stay seated in the dugout with his players. And he explained why... **“Upstairs, you can't look into the player's eyes.”**

Hey, **God wanted to look into our eyes...** to really know us, and for us to know Him... so much so, He laid aside His heavenly perks - clothed Himself in flesh, blood, and bone - and joined the human predicament.

Jesus is now a permanent member of the human family. The angel said the Baby would be called **“Emmanuel”** or **“God with us.”** Christmas means we're never alone. God will never leave us or forsake us.

Last Saturday I watched Atlanta United win the MLS Cup and noticed owner, Arthur Blank, on the sidelines.

Blank has been criticized for leaving his luxury skybox and appearing on the field at both Falcons' games and Five Stripes' games. He likes to fraternize with his players. He wants to be one-of-the-guys.

I wonder what Blank's critics would've said when the owner of the universe left His heavenly skybox - put on a uniform of hair, and muscle, and epidermis - and joined us on the sidelines - even played in the game.

Once, I read a quote by Arthur Blank where he explained his actions. He offered the reason Jesus would've given for coming into our world. Arthur told a reporter, ["I will never own any organization where I can't be close to the people of that organization... and be open about my affection for them... That's who I am, and that's the atmosphere that I want here..."](#)

And that's the atmosphere God created on that first Christmas. God became human like us. He came onto the pitch, to prove His affection for all of humanity.

Here's my point, the whole idea of Christmas: *the good will it brings, the message it communicates (joy to the world and peace on earth), the charity that comes with Christmas* is all **God's gift** to hurried humans.

The Christmas season, and all the meaning that's attached to it, is a God-given handout! The best gift this year you've already gotten... it's Christmas!

Last week I talked about **a hands-off Christmas** and our tendency to allow gift-giving and materialism to overshadow the real meaning of Christmas. Often *the stuff of Christmas* overwhelms *the spirit of Christmas*.

But that doesn't mean God is against gift-giving.

Christmas is all about giving, *and giving freely*. Jesus is the greatest gift - a Savior for those who desperately need one! There is no more fitting a gift. And a whole season to focus on Him is a marvelous gift as well.

Here're a few verses that remind us that Christmas is a gift from God... Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is **given**..." John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He **gave** His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Ephesians 5:2, "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and **given** Himself for us."

Above all, Christmas is the gift of Christ to us!

And not only was the first Christmas a gift, but God intends for all Christmases to be gifts of His grace. This Christmas is a gift from God, and there are blessings attached that you'll discover, only *if you have eyes to see and ears to hear - if you're sensitive to the Giver!*

Thus in Matthew 10, when Jesus told His disciples, "**Freely you have received**..." He was talking about all God's blessings toward them... including Christmas.

You could say the first Christmas was **a hands-out Christmas**. It was God reaching out His hands to humankind, further than any of us dreamed He would.

Christmas is about God being who He is... *Him giving, and reaching, and caring, and sharing... with His holy hands-out toward the people He created...*

Christmas forever shatters the myth of God being **an aloof God** - like a stern, uncaring old man sitting in heaven with His hands folded against His chest.

Or **a stingy God** - His hands stuck in His pockets. Or **an angry God** - His hands clenched in tight fists.

The correct picture of God is that of a loving Father with His hands out-stretched... reaching, and bending, and loving, and touching, and healing, *and giving...*

Think of the father in Luke 15 that Jesus used to illustrate the nature of our heavenly Father. The father in his story who was quick and eager to receive His prodigal son when the boy came to his senses, and turned from his rebellion, and shuffled back home.

Before his youngest son could explain himself, this dad had already grabbed him, hugged him, kissed him.

When finally, the boy uttered the words, **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son”** - it didn't deter the dad one iota! He immediately called for his best robe, a ring and sandals for the boy, even BBQ for a party, saying, **“Let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”**

That was the father's heart, and it was Jesus, the storyteller's desire to prove that this is God's heart toward us! *And yet, the attitude that's often prevalent at Christmas time is more like the older son in the story...*

Remember, he had a **you owe me and I owe you**, kind of attitude. There was no grace in his heart.

He immediately focused on what he deserved, and on what his brother didn't. He was angry his brother could waste away the family fortune, and then be forgiven without first having to pay for his mistakes. If anybody deserved a party it was him, not the prodigal.

I believe this older brother in Jesus' story could've written the lyrics, "**He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake**" - as if Christmas and its blessings were only for those who deserved them, *rather than freely given and freely received.*

The elder brother was unfamiliar with his father's heart, **a hands-out heart** - *both giving and gracious.* Yet this is truly the heart and posture of our God.

In his book, *A Gentle Thunder*, Max Lucado depicts God's love for us in the most winsome way. He writes this, "**If God had a refrigerator your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He listens.**

He can live anywhere in the universe, and He chooses your heart. And the Christmas gift He sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, God is crazy about you!"

In Matthew 10, the true Christmas spirit is summed up in a single sentence. Jesus told His disciples, *“Freely you have received, freely give...”* That’s what Christmas is about - **receiving freely from God, then giving freely to others!** Not only was the first Christmas *a hands-out Christmas*, but God wants every Christmas to be *a hands-out Christmas* - even this one.

Before we go further let me make a distinction. There is a difference between **a handout** and **a hands-out...**

In a sense all God’s gifts are handouts, but *Christmas is more than just a handout, it’s hands-out.*

We define a handout as something free of charge.

It’s given with no strings attached. Nothing of merit is exchanged for a handout. And certainly, all God’s gifts are handouts. They were purchased by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and come to us by faith alone.

But Christmas was more than *a handout* - it was **a hands-out**. If all God wanted to do was give us a handout, He would’ve appointed an exact time and place, and had everyone on earth gather at that spot; then He’d open up heaven, and air-drop His blessings.

A handout can be an impersonal, cold, mechanical act. It’s like taking a food basket to a needy family. You drop it off and leave them to eat it - *all the while they’re wondering where there next meal will come from.*

A handout eases a person’s pain in the short run, but it fails to provide them much hope for the long term.

But Christmas is more than *a handout*, it is *a hands-out*. God gave us more than a one-time gift that first Christmas - *more than a single night of peace on earth and goodwill toward men* - God gave us Himself!

He wrapped Himself in human wrapping paper, and equipped His Son with hands that would keep reaching out to each of us in on-going ways. Jesus' greatest act was when He stretched His hands out on a Roman cross, and allowed the soldiers too hammer in the nails. Our salvation was paid for by **a hands-out** act.

And now 2000 years later Jesus still stretches out His hands to us... The Lord reaches into our hearts.

Emmanuel is still with us: giving, and healing, and blessing. In fact, the next time we see our Lord Jesus, His hands will be outstretched to greet us!

I've been told in Korea when folks give gifts they do it with both hands. It communicates to the recipient that they're not holding anything back. Their gift represents all they can afford. They're giving all they can offer.

I'm sure in Korea they would call Jesus **a two-handed present**. What more could God extend to His creation than His only Son? *And He was given freely!*

This is our mission at Christmas. **"Freely you have received, freely give"** Just as God freely reaches out to us, now we need to freely reach out to other people!

It reminds me of Alex Dovaes. Alex is a Cuban who fled to America on a rickety boat with 27 other refugees. A year later,

Alex heard of another group of 14 Cubans who made it to America on an 18 foot raft.

These desperate people had floated for days with little water, and only a few rusted cans of processed meat. They finally washed ashore at Key Largo.

When Alex saw them, he commented, “I felt like I’d just arrived here myself...” And here’s what the 25 year old did. On a dishwasher’s salary, Alex gathered all the Christmas gifts under his tree, and gave them to the new arrivals. His roommate said, “The refugees were wet and cold. Alex gave them the shirt off his back.”

Don’t forget where you’ve come from this Christmas... Here’s where you don’t have to do some heavy brainstorming, and concoct some creative way to reach a lot of people with whom you’re unfamiliar.

“Freely you have received, freely you can give...”

You know where you were before Jesus entered your life, and turned it around. And you don’t have to look far to find someone in the exact same situation.

You lost a loved one, but since then you’ve discovered God’s comfort and peace... You struggled financially, but now you’ve seen God pull you through... You had a tough time finding a job, but today you get a regular paycheck... You battled with cancer, yet now you’re enjoying a miracle of remission...

You recently got married, but you can still recall the loneliness of being single during the holidays...

Last year in the midst of your bereavement, or hardship, or loneliness, wouldn't it have been nice if a family had invited you to share in their celebration?

*Maybe this year you can be the one who extends hospitality? Maybe it's your turn to help out the fellow who lost his job, and can't afford gifts for his kids? **Why don't you be an initiator this Christmas?** Jesus said, **since we've freely received, we should freely give!***

Christmas is a time to look over your shoulder, and recall the folks that are struggling with the same issues you faced. True Christmas cheer seeks to be shared.

This Christmas why don't you give the gift of love.

Once a monk came to the aid of a needy traveler. He gave the sojourner a precious stone that he could sell for funds to get back home. A few days later, the traveler came back to the monk to return the jewel.

He'd been so impressed with the compassion and generosity the monk had shown, he said he could never sell his jewel. He put it back in his hand and asked, **"Now please give me something much more precious than this stone. Give me what enabled you to give it away!"** He sought the gift of God's grace...

If you want to add something to your gift list this year; then ask God to make you a grace-filled person.

After World War 2 Europe and England began picking up the pieces. Nations had been devastated by the ravages of

war, and one of the most chilling effects were the scores and scores of orphaned children.

Early one morning an American soldier was driving through the streets of London. He spotted an orphaned boy - pressing his nose against the window of a pastry shop. The GI could hear the rumblings of the little boy's starving belly, crying out for the piping hot pastries.

He stopped his jeep, went into the store, and bought a bag full of goodies; then handed them to the kid.

The soldier was about to walk off, when the little guy looked up at him, and asked, "Mister, are you God?"

We're never more like God than when our hands are outstretched, and they are giving to people around us.

If you want to make the most out of Christmas; then make sure it's not about *what you get*, it's about *what you give*. It's true, "Christmas is love in action. Every time we love, every time we give, it's Christmas time."

A true Christmas celebration is always *hands-out*.

Earlier I read **John 3:16**, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."

But **1 John 3:16** is also a vital verse. And the content of the two verses are so interrelated it's appropriate they carry the same address... *John 3:16* tells us how much God loves us. And *1 John 3:16* tells us that since He does, we should give ourselves to one another.

In his letter, John puts it this way, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's

goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

This is the glory of Christmas... “**Freely you have received, freely give.**” The *wise men* stretched out their hands, and gave to Jesus gold, frankincense, myrrh...

The *shepherds* gave the newborn king their praise and proclamation... The *angels* delivered a message, and gave good news to eager ears... *Mary* gave Jesus a home for 9 months - and a mom for a lifetime...

While *Joseph* made sure God’s instructions were followed, and His son’s physical needs were met...

If you notice everyone in the Christmas story was giving in some way... and giving freely... *And that’s why I ask us, what are we giving this Christmas?* Not exchanging *tit for tat* - not *you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours* - but really giving freely and graciously?

It reminds me of a wife who couldn’t think of a gift to give her husband... They’d recently attended their son’s wrestling match. His team had squared off against an inner-city squad. Since their son’s team was better equipped, and trained, they won every match.

And the outcome had upset her husband. Mike wished the poorer kids had at least prevailed in one match. He knew how disheartened they must’ve felt.

That’s when his wife came up with Mike’s Christmas present... She went to the sporting goods store and bought

miscellaneous headgear and wrestling shoes; then sent them anonymously to the inner-city team.

She put an envelope in the Christmas tree telling her husband what she'd done, and that it was her gift to him. On Christmas morning, when Mike read the note he couldn't stop beaming. Her gift was Mike's favorite.

Well, a Christmas tradition was born that year.

Every Christmas thereafter, there was always an envelope for Mike in the Christmas tree. *One year his wife sent a group of mentally-impaired children to a hockey game... Another year a check went to a family whose house had burned down... and on it went...*

Though her kid's were always grateful for *their* gifts, every year dad's envelope was the main attraction.

But this Christmas tale doesn't end there. Listen to Mike's wife finish her story. She writes, "We lost Mike last year to cancer. And when Christmas rolled around, I was so wrapped up in grief I barely got the tree up.

But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope in the tree, and on Christmas morning, it was joined by three more envelopes. Each of our kids, unbeknownst to the others, placed an envelope in the tree for dad."

This wife had blessed her husband while he was alive. Together they had left a legacy. They taught their kids that *Christmas should be celebrated hands-out.*

One of a parent's greatest Christmas joys is to see the look on their child's face when they open their gift.

The smile that child wears is priceless... *Could it be that same smile is why God is so giving and gracious?*

That's what one author was thinking when he wrote the following words, "Have you wondered why God gives so much? We could exist on far less. He could've left the world flat and gray; we wouldn't have known the difference. But He didn't... *Did He have to make the squirrel's tale furry? Was He obliged to make the birds sing? And the funny way that chickens scratch? Or the majesty of thunder when it rings? Why give a flower fragrance? Why give food its taste? Could it be... God loves to see... that look upon your face?"*

This is exactly what Jesus taught us about God. In Matthew 7:11 we get a glimpse into the Father's heart. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

Like any father, God in heaven derives enormous joy by giving to His children. The look on your face when He blesses you, causes God's heart to rejoice.

And this is one of the reasons that giving to others is so contagious. To thrill and surprise a needy person with a gift they don't deserve is a heavenly experience.

This why Christmas is the perfect time for burying the hatchet, and extending forgiveness, and second chances. You rob yourself by *keeping your hands folded on your chest*, rather than *hands out to others*.

In 1866, a man named John Whittier, penned a poem that's as true today as it was when first written.

“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 make you glad.”

One of the few times Jesus is quoted outside the Gospels is in Acts 20:35. There Jesus is recorded as saying, “It is more blessed to give than it is to receive.”

Many of us have quoted that verse all our lives. *This Christmas, why not experience it firsthand?* Let's test the truth of that verse by getting our **hands out!**

Hey, this Christmas, let's put into practice, “**Freely you have received, freely give...**” If this year you want to experience your best Christmas ever - *hands down...* then why not make it **a hands-out Christmas.**