



They Can't Take Him Away From You!

It's Christmas? Where did the time go? This Christmas, as always, I must prepare myself for the inevitable Christmas pain. No, the pain isn't what you think it is. I'm better about that—I'm less a Scrooge than I was—at least a little bit.

The "pain" to which I refer is from the religious people who, at Christmas, become so religious they drive me nuts. Frankly, I'm not altogether bothered by the fact that they have *taken Christ out of Christmas*. I don't get uptight that Santa is more important than Jesus. It doesn't bother me a whole lot that the politically correct crowd won't sing Christmas carols in the public schools, or they won't let us put a manger scene in the town square.

Well, maybe some of those things bother me a bit.

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There, now I feel better and can continue.

What really bothers me are the Christians who are so spiritual they can't enjoy the fun and celebration of Christmas and don't want anybody else to enjoy it either. I suspect that at some Christmas past they got underwear that was the wrong size...far too small. Instead of exchanging the underwear, they keep on wearing it.

But whatever the reason, at Christmas these people are always angry about what the world has done to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and they simply can't abide the "pagan" symbols that have become a part of what ought to be a Christian holy day.

My late friend, Rusty Anderson, told me that he loved Christmas except the "religious" part. Rusty said that he very much liked the time with family, the parties and the joyous feeling at Christmas, but he always had this vague sense of guilt about not being

religious enough. "I like Christmas," he said in his much-missed and shocking way, "except the Jesus part."

There is an interesting text in Matthew 11. Jesus had been getting a lot of criticism because, I guess, he wasn't serious enough and liked to party. At that time, John was in prison about to die and wanted to make sure that he wasn't dying for a lost cause. In other words, John wanted to make sure that Jesus was the Messiah. So John the Baptist's disciples went to visit Jesus on behalf of John.

Listen to what Matthew says Jesus says:

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matthew 11:16-19).

I've been hanging out with Jesus and at Christmas, I think, I do that more than at other times. Good heavens! One can't get away from him. Jesus is everywhere, and even the pagans can't stop it.

You go to the mall and in the middle of all the secular Christmas music, one that praises Jesus slips in. Everywhere one looks there are signs that something wonderful has happened...Christmas trees, manger scenes in people's front yards, church Christmas displays and Christmas concerts, plays and presentations almost every night during the season.

My staff even went to Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede—a large tourist attraction here in Orlando—for a Christmas outing last year. Right there in the

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he asked me to remind you

middle of the horses, music and the...uh...manure, a manger scene drops out of the ceiling of the gigantic auditorium. And there he is: JESUS. He's everywhere...pagans hate it and can't do anything about it. They just have to deal with it.

During the Christmas season I, of course, sing Christmas carols but more often of late, I've been singing the lyrics written by Ira and George Gershwin (at least one line) from the 1958 Fred Astaire movie *Shall We Dance*. You may remember the lyrics: "They can't take that away from me. No, no, they can't take that away from me."

I don't know about you, but I grow so tired of words. That's what I do for a living, and my words sometimes seem so empty and devoid of power. Add that to the sellers of trinkets who are always pushing products, the religious hucksters and the God talk.

Then I remember that it isn't just words. The Word has become flesh. It happened, and it is there for all to see. God has entered this world of time and space and loved us.

During Christmas I think about Jesus and the fact that God has really come...really. The writer of Hebrews begins his magnificent book with these words:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being... (Hebrews 1:1-3).

People look at me funny whenever I do it, but I don't care. I can't help but sing, *They can't take that away from me. No, no, they can't take that away from me.*

When I was a pastor I found out that Christmas can be a very depressing time for a whole lot of people. If someone is depressed, afraid or lonely...at Christmas that is magnified. There is a lot of fake joy and real sadness at Christmas.

And I sometimes despair when I look at the war on terror, the hatred in our world and the truly barbarian people who think they can murder innocent people in the name of God. Sometimes I wonder if anybody is in charge of this mess.

But listen to the next part of this verse from the anointed pen of the writer of Hebrews:

...sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3).

At Christmas I remember that fact. I remember that no matter how dark it gets he is still on the throne. I remember that this is his show, and that the end has already been written when Jesus comes the second time saying, in effect, "The first time I came as a baby, and you hung me on the cross...but you won't ever do that to me again. This time I'm coming with my angels. I'm going to clean up the mess and reconcile all things to myself."

I know I sound silly singing in shopping malls. But I don't care.

They can't take that away from me. No, no, they can't take that away from me.

Sometimes I despair of me. I have a friend who is in his eighties who told me that he was ready to die because he just couldn't stand himself anymore. But it's not just my own sin...it is the sin of everybody. It can give you depression that no dose of Zoloft can fix. Then I listen again to the words of the writer of Hebrews...

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Hebrews 1:3).

Yea, God! I'm forgiven, acceptable and valuable. If that doesn't make you sing at Christmas, you just haven't understood.

They can't take that away from me. No, no, they can't take that away from me.

So this Christmas go get some new underwear, and laugh, sing and celebrate. He has come and nobody can ever take that away from you.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown