

“A ‘DICKENS’ OF A CHRISTMAS (#2): THE ‘BUSINESS’ OF HUMANITY”
(Micah 6:6-8; Luke 1:46-53)

[PROPS NEEDED: #1)“A CHRISTMAS CAROL” Video-Clip; #2) “Christmas Investment Ideas” list pre-printed in bulletin; #3) “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” original book]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-9-07]

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1. Read Texts: Micah 6:6-8; Luke 1:46-53 and Pray.

2. Last Sunday 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.

A–Today our focus is on the “Ghost of Christmas Present,” and on what both Scrooge and we can learn about life and faith from him.

B–To understand what I mean, let’s watch some highlights of Scrooge’s encounter with this Ghost [**WATCH VIDEO-CLIP** (Ghost of Christmas Present Montage) ¹ –*Time: 3:19...*]

C–Seeing this clip reminds me of several important lessons that I believe we – like Scrooge – can learn from this ghost (find these in your bulletin “Sermon Notes”):

3. First of all, Scrooge learns that **Happiness can’t be Bought, but is Found in our Relationships**, both with other human beings and with God.

A–Remember that in his journey with this Ghost, 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 you know, like Scrooge, there are many of us today who seem to 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! Spend money on that & you’ll be content!*”
(b) A bigger house, a nicer car, a larger large-screen TV, a bigger diamond on our ring – these, we think, are what happiness is all about.

2–And yet, too often when we receive that which we think is the “ultimate” gift, we find that it’s not enough -- we want more, and we’re still empty inside. ²

3–You see, like Scrooge, 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!*”³

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 very few material possessions, in today’s Luke 1 scripture we find her singing:

[NRSV] “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. ...the Mighty One has done great things for me... He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.’”*

[MSG] “*I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened - I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!... He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.’”*

D–You see, in her preparation for the first Christmas, Mary knew that happiness was not found in *things*, but *here* [POINT TO MY HEART]... in what’s in our *hearts* – that true contentment and joy in life can’t be bought, but is found only in our relationships, both with God and 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, we see the aging Ghost of Christmas Present pull back his robe to reveal two emaciated children: a girl representing “Want”; & a boy representing “Ignorance” with the word “*doom*” on his forehead.

1–Now, 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.⁴

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

B--And Dickens was right – somehow the 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, Scrooge might have said “*If they’ve no place to go, then they’d better die & decrease the surplus population.*”

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

A–We see the poor alongside the road in downtown Marietta or in Atlanta, and we lock our car doors to try to avoid them – I know because I’ve done it myself at times!

1–Or we hear about the poor in some other part of the world, and 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.*”⁵

B–In today’s Micah 6 scripture 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.

1–Verse 8:

[NRSV] “*[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*”

[MSG] “*[God] has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God serious.*”⁶

2–You see, here we’re reminded that our 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 are hurting and in need, who can do absolutely *nothing* for us in return (except, perhaps save our soul!).⁷

–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 this:

“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?”* ⁸

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]....”* ⁹

2—We’re created to have the kind of love that (as one author put it) *“treats other people as more important than [ourselves].”* ¹⁰

D—After all, that’s what the first Christmas was all about: ...God so loved *us* that he put *us* first, even before himself. ¹¹

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! ¹²

7. On the back of your bulletins, you’ll find a box called “Christmas Investment Ideas” that lists a number of ways that you & I can invest ourselves in the lives of others this holiday season.

A—Over the next few weeks as we approach Christmas, I want to challenge each of us to do one or more of them – perhaps you’ll want to start today by purchasing a bow for our “Hope In A Blanket” tree (that you heard about earlier).

B—But whatever you do, by doing these, we’ll be reminded (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. [HYMN: #242 “Love Came Down At Christmas”]

ENDNOTES:

1. The montage includes 3 scenes of Scrooge with the Ghost of Christmas Present: sprinkling/blessing of the poor; Cratchit home celebration; boy & girl children (“Want” & “Ignorance”).
2. 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.*”
3. 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).
4. 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.
5. Vern McLellan, The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs and Wacky Wit (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996).
6. “[*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.
7. 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).
8. Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Stories (New York: Signet Classics, Penguin Group Books, 1984), pp. 49 & 51.
9. 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.
10. Ron Jackson, “Christmas Is For People,” From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B76.

11. 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.”*

12. One could even say that the 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!