

Santa v. Jesus

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Last modified: December 1, 2017

Introduction

(SLIDE 1) Today we start a new series about Christmas. I'm going to say some words of some famous Christmas songs, and I'd like you to fill in the next line of the lyric.

O holy night, the stars are brightly gleaming
It is the night _____ (of our dear Savior's birth)

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree
How lovely are _____ (your branches)

Last Christmas, I gave you my heart
But the very next day, _____ (you gave it away)

I saw Mommy kissing _____ (Santa Claus)

If you knew nothing about Christmas, and you listened to these songs back to back, what impression would you get? Is it about the birth of Jesus (O Holy Night)? Putting a tree inside your house and decorating it (O Christmas Tree)? Is it just another season for failed romance (Last Christmas)? Is it about an old, fat guy who breaks into your house? When you stop to think about, what do all these things have to do with each other? If you listen to Boston's MAGIC 106.7 FM, you know that they already started playing Christmas songs all the time. You can literally hear these songs all in a row.

Relevance:

So today we're going to talk about Santa v. Jesus. It's kind of like Batman v. Superman. We'll do a head-to-head comparison. Because these are the two main personalities at Christmas. And this comparison gets at the heart of what Christmas is about. Even if you don't believe in Jesus, you'll see Nativity scenes placed on the lawns of churches, homes, sometimes even shopping malls. On the other hand, even if you don't 'do' Santa in your home, you can't avoid Santa. You see that guy everywhere! If you have kids, they're going to ask about Santa.

So Santa v. Jesus. I want to make the case that we all have a leaning towards one or the other, because Santa has a theology. There is a theology that comes with Santa, and it is very American. The idea of Santa suggests something to us about who God is. And it's not a good picture of God. And I'm not saying that you should or should not use the idea of Santa with your kids if you have kids. If you want to have that conversation, we can later. What I'm saying here, though, is that the idea of Santa comes with an image of God. It's the image of a God who lives far away, who knows stuff about you, and leaves you as you are so you can prove on your own strength whether you deserve goodies. This is very American. Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps because look, Santa's watching.

Jesus reveals a God who comes to live with us, to bring us back to him, so we can rely on his strength. In that way, Jesus is not like Santa, and it's important to not get the two of them confused. Many people actually interpret Jesus through the lens of Santa, as if Jesus watches us from some 'North Pole,' as if he just waits for you to prove on your own strength whether you deserve his goodies. That's not who he is. That's not who the one true God really is. So, I want to make four points, comparing Santa v. Jesus. And we're going to use the idea of Santa to get to know Jesus better. Because the whole point of Christmas, really, is to fall in love with Jesus, more and more.

Outline:

I'm going to talk about four main differences between Santa v. Jesus. (SLIDE 2) (1) What do they know about you? Santa knows your behavior. Jesus knows your thoughts, motives, and secrets. (2) What do they want? Santa wants to give you a report card. Jesus wants you to return to him. (SLIDE 3) (3) What do they climb into? Santa climbs into your chimney. Jesus climbs into your human nature. (4) What do they give? Santa gives you presents. Jesus gives you himself.

Santa Knows Your Behavior, Jesus Knows You

(SLIDE 4) First, let me start with a way in which Santa and Jesus are similar. Santa knows you. And Jesus knows you. Santa knows you. Jesus knows you. The song about Santa says:

You better watch out
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town

(SLIDE 5) He's making a list
He's checking it twice;
He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice
Santa Claus is coming to town

(SLIDE 6) He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!

Now, when we were kids, I'm sure our parents enjoyed telling us about Santa. It's like putting a video camera up in your kids room and claiming that it's always on. You better watch out! You better not cry! Someone is watching. Someone with a capital S. Santa. Santa is watching you all the time. He somehow sees what you're doing, what you're thinking, and what you're feeling.

That is similar to Jesus. Here are some stories from the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John when Jesus knew things about people that ordinary human beings wouldn't know:

(SLIDE 7) 21 The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (SLIDE 8) 22 But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts? (Luke 5:21 – 22)

(SLIDE 9) 39 Now when [Simon] the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, (SLIDE 10) that she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." (Luke 7:39 – 40)

(SLIDE 11) 16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." 17 The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." (SLIDE 12) Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." (John 4:16 – 18)

(SLIDE 13) 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (John 2:24 – 25)

Jesus knows what we think. All kinds of crazy thoughts! And he knows what is in us. Everything you try to hide, he sees it as if you had the lights on when you were doing that. The Bible says, "Even the night is as day to you." The things you've whispered in secret will be shouted out loud, said Jesus. So not only does Jesus know, ultimately, he will publicly respond to you. He hears the words in your heart. And he will talk to you about them. Will that really happen? Yes! When? Well, definitely in eternity but beginning now. These stories were the trailers. The full movie about all of us is coming to come out in eternity. And we will be in it with Jesus. He'll talk to us publicly about the thoughts we thought were private, the actions we thought were private. Because Jesus doesn't just see what we do. He sees our thoughts and emotions. He knows what is in us. And he loves us anyway. That's

the amazing thing about Jesus. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He can articulate who we are and what we're feeling faster than we can.

Illus: That can be scary. When I grew up, I thought of spiritual life as learning stuff. I did not grow up in a Christian family. My dad liked science and my mom was semi-Buddhist. That's why I thought about spiritual life as being about discovering truth like in science, or becoming enlightened like in Buddhism. And I kind of liked that because it put me in control. Like I'm the one learning stuff, but I'm in control of what. So yeah, Santa knows our behavior. But Jesus knows our motives, our thoughts, our deepest secrets. And as we get to know Jesus, we realize that he has already known us, all the way down. That's bad news if you want to hide something. That's good news if you're tired of being fake. That's good news if you're tired of wearing a mask. That's good news if you want a community that doesn't pretend.

Santa Wants to Evaluate Your Behavior, Jesus Wants You to Return to Him

What does Santa want? (SLIDE 14) Santa wants to give us a report card. Here's this naughty to nice meter. The song says: 'He's making a list; he's checking it twice; he's gonna find out who's naughty or nice... He sees you when you're sleeping; He knows when you're awake; He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!' (SLIDE 15) Essentially, Santa came to give you your report card for the year. He's got a list. Here's how you did. If you did a lot of good things, you get a nice present. Maybe that new phone that you've wanted. Maybe that new pair of shoes. But if you did a lot of bad things, you get a piece of coal (SLIDE 16). You ever hear of that? Santa might leave you a lump of coal in your stocking or somewhere. Can you imagine? You get a rock.

Illus: When I was a kid, I would bring home my report card from school. And my parents would give me a dime for every A on my report card. I was really excited. Because I would get five or six A's, and I would make enough to play two games of Pac Man in the arcade.

But what about the Creator God of the universe, who loves you, whose whole being is love? This God knows you and loves you. And He wants to be with you. (SLIDE 17) Jesus said in Luke 19:10, 'I came to seek and save the lost.' Jesus created us. Before the Son of God entered into the womb of Mary of Nazareth and became Jesus of Nazareth, he was our creator. The Bible says, 'All things were made by him, through him, and for him.' So before the Son of God took our human nature upon himself in the womb of Mary of Nazareth, he had already been our Creator. But we were lost. So he came to look for us, to gather us to himself, and save us. That's why it's so touching and poetic and powerful that as soon as Jesus came out of the womb, he started drawing people to himself. You see two groups of people coming to Jesus. First are the shepherds, who were Jewish shepherds, lowest on the social ladder because they worked all the time instead of going to synagogue or attending service. But they were close to where Jesus was born. So they showed up. Jesus was seeking them, so they came. Second are the wise men of the East, called the magi, and sometimes they are pictured as three wise men, even though there were probably more than three guys. They made a long journey. They might have even been kings. Jesus was seeking them, so they came.

You belong to God. You belong to the Son of God. But there's just one problem He has to take care of, and fix in us: our self-centeredness. Jesus knows what is in us. Which brings us to the third point.

Santa Climbs Down Your Chimney Without Getting Dirty, Jesus Climbs Into Humanity and Cleans it Up

(SLIDE 18) Santa climbs down into our chimney and keeps his suit clean, somehow. Then he goes back up. But Jesus did something more amazing. Jesus came from the Father. He climbed down into our human nature, put it on, and he cleaned it all the way down from head to toe. And he went back up to the Father with a cleaned up human nature.

If Jesus came to just give us a report card, then why did he need to come down as a baby to do it? He could have just stayed in heaven. He could have just said, "Hey, you get an F. Try harder next time." Let that point sink in, because sometimes we reduce Jesus to Santa, and we think Jesus is just giving us a report card. It's the whole idea in other religions of a distant God who will be a judge at the end. Sorry: A distant God isn't morally qualified to be a judge at the end.

Jesus is the intervention of God. He shows us that God is actually intervening all the time in more subtle ways. He's not just giving us a report card. Jesus knows we've failed. That report card was given all the way back at the Garden of Eden. Jesus came to fix the damage we've done to ourselves. Why do you think there has been sexual misconduct that's now coming into the light? Why do you think people will collude with foreign powers just to get more power? A few nights ago, my wife was pushed down to the ground by three kids who then stole her glasses and ran off. Why do we do these stupid things? Because we're broken, and we need Jesus to heal us. Our human nature is broken. There's a disorder in each of us. This is why the deeper reason why the world is messed up. That's why we keep failing. God didn't want it this way. God is not complicit with evil. He has given His Son and His Spirit to fight it, and to clean up our human nature. So Jesus came to give us the antidote, to be the medicine, to be the cure, and to be our healing.

Imagine what if Santa climbed down into our chimney and didn't just keep his suit clean, he cleaned the whole chimney! And not just that. What if Santa fixed your toilet while he was there. What if he made your bathtub drain again. What if he cleaned everything and made everything work again by actually rebuilding your house from its foundations?

(SLIDE 19) Well Jesus did that to human nature. He rebuilt human nature from its foundations. Jesus came as a baby to undo baby jealousies, by being affectionate already to God the Father. He became a teenager to undo teenage jealousies and laziness and angers by giving himself to God the Father, constantly. Jesus grew into adulthood to undo adult sins. Whatever it is that leads people to become sex predators, Jesus never gave even started down that road. He turned human nature away from that path. He never colluded with the foreign Roman government for his own gain, which was a real possibility in that time; other Jewish leaders took that road, but Jesus always chose the way of integrity to God the Father. He never compromised with evil. He didn't just enter into our world only to get out clean. He cleaned up his human nature on the way, all the way from head to toe. He rebuilt human nature in his own body so he could do it now in us, by putting his Spirit in us. Which brings us to the last point.

Santa Gives Presents, Jesus Gives Himself

(SLIDE 20) Santa gives us presents at best once a year. Jesus gives us himself, all the time.

Illus: When I was a kid, I wanted Santa to be real. So I wished, wished, and wished that Santa was real. Then I noticed that we could return Santa's gifts to Best Buy. That's amazing that Santa's elves could forge receipts. Or did Santa actually shop at Best Buy? Hey, wait a minute... Then I got older and I realized two things. First, I wanted someone way more constant and tangible. How is Santa any different than any other man who shows up in your life once a year? Second, I need more than a few presents. There were deeper things wrong with me and every single person I knew. We need a Savior and a redeemer, not just a report card.

(SLIDE 21) Jesus gives us himself. To express this in a physical way, he gave us the practice of communion. We take in the bread and wine as a reminder that we take in his life into ourselves. He nourishes us spiritually, and becomes part of us.

Illus: During my sophomore year in high school, they started arguing about divorce. I would sometimes go to school and start crying. Early on, during a lunch period, I went to go talk to my old biology teacher who was really good at listening and really encouraging. I knew she would say things that would make me feel better. I told her what was happening at home. Sure enough, she said some really encouraging things. Then I went a bit further. I told her how I was trying to focus on school and swimming. I knew I was fishing. Being the nice person she was, she said, 'Mako, I really respect how you're trying to hold things together.' Then the bell rang. As I left the room, I heard a voice in my mind say, 'Mako, you can turn any situation to your advantage, can't you?' I thought, 'Who said that?' Looking back, I think that was Jesus. But I ignored him for a while. He was pursuing me, helping me to know how much I needed him. And later on in my life, I came to see how that warning about my own self-centeredness was true. Jesus helped me to see the truth. Even when we feel unloved by everyone else, Jesus' call is to love him and be loved by him. Otherwise, we choose ourselves in a deeper way and we make bigger mistakes.

The Real Saint Nicholas Loved the Real Jesus

But don't just take it from me. Take it from the real St. Nicholas. (SLIDE 22) The real St. Nicholas loved the real Jesus. St. Nicholas was a Turkish or Greek man who was a Christian leader in the time of the last great persecution

of Christians by the Roman Empire. He became a Christian bishop of a city called Myra, in what is now Turkey. He died in 343 AD. He is known for having sold his entire inheritance to care for the poor, especially children. There are stories that go back to this time period of him tossing little gifts into windows, which would land in kids' shoes or socks, which is where we get the idea of putting up stockings and stuffing them with gifts. He was also known for prayer, and praying for miracles, and God did miracles of healing through him. This is why there are cathedrals dedicated to Saint Nicholas all over the Middle East, in Europe, and Russia. This is why Christopher Columbus named Mole Saint Nicolas in Haiti when he landed there in 1492. It's why Jacksonville, Florida was originally called Saint Nicholas. But American storytellers and then marketers added all these details and changed St. Nicholas to Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas loved the real Jesus. To him, there was no St. Nicholas v. Jesus. It was just Jesus!!

Conclusion & Communion