



December 2013

Friends,

We all know the Grinch story, right? He wanted to destroy Christmas for everyone because he was lonely and had no joy. So, he stole all their presents, decorations, food, everything. But, he was the one who was surprised on Christmas morning:

*“Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn’t stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same! And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: ‘How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!’ And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! ‘Maybe Christmas,’ he thought, ‘*doesn’t* come from a store. Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!’”*

What makes Christmas feel so different than the rest of the year? Why does it come no matter what the circumstances, like it did for the Whos down in Whoville? What is that “little bit more” that Dr. Seuss described?

My husband sometimes asks us random questions to get us thinking and talking as a family. As we were decorating our tree, he asked, “what’s your favorite thing about Christmas.” Our oldest son said, “everyone is so joyful. And people are generous without having to be pushed. They just want to give.” A joyful heart longs to give. Maybe the joy we have is an overflow of the gift that was given to us two thousand years ago. Even those who don’t know our great Savior, Jesus Christ, can feel the joy this time of year when we celebrate His coming into the world. They may not even know why they feel joy. I have no idea if Dr. Seuss knew Jesus personally or how he felt about God. But, one thing he clearly did know... Christmas is something special that has nothing to do with getting presents.

But, so many people feel just the opposite of joy at Christmas. They remember what joy was like in a different time and they long for it. They miss a particular person or a season of life. They want so much more than the pressure to buy gifts for people that don’t *really* need anything, or to spend time with people at holiday parties out of obligation. It seems like depression during the holidays is rooted in a longing for joy. Maybe that’s the idea behind the Grinch... a lonely guy who was longing for joy and didn’t know how to find it. So, he tried to take it from others.

Do you have joy this time of year, or are you longing for joy? Have you ever considered that joy can be a choice? The book of Nehemiah tells the story of Nehemiah the prophet, who led the people of Israel to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem so it would be protected. After the

wall was finished, Ezra read from the scriptures. The people listened as he read the word for many hours. They began grieving over their sin and neglect of God's law. But that is not what God wanted for them.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:10

What if we all choose joy no matter what our circumstances are? What if we let ourselves feel the joy of this season? Ignore the pressure to buy gifts for everyone that might possibly expect one or that might buy one for you. Let it go. Does it really matter? Will it ruin a relationship if you don't have a gift? What if you use that time and energy to go do something fun with someone? Take your grandmother to look at Christmas lights. Go surprise a bell ringer with some hot cocoa. Go tell an overworked, underpaid retail worker thank you for how they are serving and give them a treat. Take your kids to ride down a big hill on some cardboard. Spread true joy.

Our culture becomes more materialistic and appearance-based all the time. Don't believe the lie that the things you have or the way you look can bring joy. True joy is choosing to love and give because we are loved and because we were given life.

Yes, Christmas is about giving, but let's really think about how and what we are supposed to give. Think about the gift that we were given on the night Christ was born. Our all-powerful, all-knowing Creator, lowered Himself to be a completely vulnerable, weak baby born into the lowest conditions imaginable – a stable for farm animals. He made Himself nothing (Philippians 2:6-8). He came to give us a new promise, a new hope, a new way of life that didn't involve countless rules, regulations and sacrifices. He came to give us a way back to God. Only love would drive Him to do such a thing.

What will we let love drive us to do this Christmas? What can we give that will really mean something and make a difference in this harsh, sinful world? What can we give our children that will change and challenge their hearts instead of just making sure they have the latest and greatest that all the other kids have. I don't know the answer for you, but I can tell you that thinking about Christmas in this way has made this time of year so much more meaningful for my family. And we have more time and money to give because we're not out shopping for gifts that people don't need. It doesn't make a lot of sense in the eyes of the world, but we have begun to experience why Christmas "means a little bit more."

Joy to the world,

And do not forget to do good and to share with others,  
for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Hebrews 13:16