

Christmas is such a wonderful season. The magic of so many traditions fills the air with joy and happiness that isn't always felt other times of the year. Each one of us can recall the thrill of being a child on Christmas morning and the opening of all those gifts.

I look back at the past and see it from two different perspectives. First, there is so much good in Christmas. Second, there is so much of the world in Christmas. Hang in there with me! I'm not going to take away the fun of your Christmas season; I'm only going to get you to think a little. Have you ever considered the following question: "How would Christ want us to celebrate his birthday?" The answer to this interesting query has to come through a study of the life of Christ.

You and I at Christmas

1. Shopping
2. Gifts
3. Parties
4. Families together
5. Beautiful music
6. Sharing good wishes with neighbors
7. Bright lights-decorations
8. Santa
9. Tree

Christ at Christmas

1. Love
2. Service to others
3. Families together
4. Sharing the gospel with others
5. Forgiving enemies
6. Prayer and devotion
7. Beautiful music
8. Anything that brings us closer to Christ

Christmas should be a celebration of Christ. The test for your family and mine must be, "Does what I am doing at Christmas time bring myself and my family closer to Christ"? If our activities do not meet that test then, can they be beneficial?

In my estimation, the major problems that we face at Christmas time are the money spent, and the giving of gifts. Another question that must be answered: "Is Christmas at my house a celebration of Christ or a celebration of gifts?" Our task is to figure out how to mix the two.

I don't believe that we must abandon Christmas because some elements of it are too worldly. We must become creative in our approach to this wonderful holiday and find ways to turn our families closer to Christ through our celebrations. Visits to Temple Square, singing in choirs, enacting the shepherds scene, reading the wonderful stories of Christmas, reaching out to family members that we have wronged, watching after the widow, and seeking out the poor are just a few of the many things that we can do to bring Christ back into Christmas.

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so.

It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas --- oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it -- Overspending ... the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma --- the gifts given in desperation because you could not think of anything else to give. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church.

These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes.

As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that could not acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids -- all kids -- and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That is when the idea for his present came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me.

His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition --- one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

May we all remember the true Christmas spirit this year and always!