

An Undivided Christmas  
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Well, Thanksgiving is over now. I hope you had a wonderful holiday this weekend. I hope you rested up a bit, because now it's a mad dash...right? I love the Christmas season. I love the music...check it out, I have like 9 hours of Christmas music on my office PC. I love the decorations. I love the spirit of generosity. I love the gift exchanges, except when I've forgotten someone I should have remembered. You know, they're giving you a gift and you're thinking, "doo", because you have nothing to give them and you feel like a fool. Never happened to you, right? Only me. Uh-huh.

Anyway, I love the Christmas season. But even as much as I love this season, I also dread it. Know what I mean? We're sitting here at 4 weeks out and there's a part of me getting excited and then there's just as much in me that's saying, "Stop the bus, I don't want to do this ride again."

Is anybody there with me? You all understand this right? I can tell you what I'm dreading about the next four weeks. Busyness, overspending, too much to do, shopping, crowds in the store.

But what is it that we do like about the season? No, wait, let me ask it this way. I want you to think of some words that would describe a "pure" Christmas. One that is void of the distractions. If you could have a pure Christmas experience, what words would describe it? (Answers like: Joy, peace, generosity, love, gratitude, wonder, family, etc) Yeah, these are the things that make Christmas such a special time, because even in the midst of the distractions, we still, by God's grace, experience these things.

And wouldn't it be cool to experience a "pure" Christmas...an undivided Christmas.

You know that there is something in us that longs for things in their purest form. When something is pure, it is undefiled, unblemished, uncontaminated. I love a fresh snow, before it gets shoveled and walked on and driven over, or becomes yellow. We long for purer air. And we invest in ways to purify our water...In fact, there is a bottled water company out there called Canadian Iceberg Water Co, that claims to bottle the purest water in the world. Their website said this: *"12,000 years ago the earth's snow was truly pure. Untouched. Pristine in the Canadian Arctic, this snow froze and compacted within glacial walls, avoiding all impurities from the outside world. Millenniums later, these icebergs are harvested as pure as the day they were created. We make it with care. Nature makes it pure premium. Canadian Iceberg Water is the finest water available anywhere in the world today."*

Of course the skeptic in me wonders if there weren't any polar bears in that area 12,000 years ago...but the point is, that water would not be selling if there was not a market for it. We long for things in their purest form.

In fact, we have created a whole department of the Federal Government, the Food and Drug Administration, precisely because we are serious about some forms of purity. They are charged with monitoring and protecting the purity of what we eat. But we need to keep in mind that our standards for purity and the government's might be a little different.

Let's just talk about the government's standards for purity of a few products. Now these figures come from a book by John Ortberg, so I hope these are accurate, but they are entertaining nonetheless, so I'm going to share them, and hope that none of them are on your lunch menu today.

**Apple butter:** If the mold count is 12 percent or more, if it averages 4 rodent hairs per 100 grams, if it averages 5 or more whole insects (not counting mites, aphids, or scale insects) per 100 grams, then the FDA will pull it from the shelves. Otherwise, it will go right onto your English muffins.

**Coffee beans:** These will be pulled from the market if an average of 10 percent or more are insect-infested or if there is one live insect in each of 2 or more immediate containers.

**Mushrooms:** Mushrooms cannot be sold if there is an average of 20 or more maggots of any size per 15 grams of dried mushrooms.

**Hotdogs:** let's not and just say we did, OK?

Even when we try to make sure things are pure, we can't. We long for purity, but we rarely, if ever, find something in its purest form. It's even true of us, isn't it? We have a longing in us for a pure heart, but just like Christmas, just like food, we aren't.

And you know, we are not the only ones who long for purity in us. God also desires that we would have purity in our hearts. Jesus once said, **[slide] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."** **Matthew 5:8** And this passage has really struck me as a passage to help me prepare for Christmas. Because I want to see Jesus this Christmas. I have to admit. I've been through some Christmas seasons so distracted and unfocused that I don't think I did see Jesus. Not that he wasn't there. I wasn't there.

I really want my Christmas experience to be one where I can constantly see God in our world. And really not just my Christmas experience, but my whole life! That's what I think Eugene Peterson means when he paraphrases Jesus' saying about the pure in heart like this: **[slide] *You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and your heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. Matthew 5:8, The Message.***

So here we are. Sitting 4 weeks out from Christmas, and part of me is going, "man, I'm really dreading the next four weeks." And another part of me is going, "This year, I

really want to get my mind and heart in the right place – because I really want to see God at work in the world, in my world.”

Isn't that what Christmas is all about anyway? At Christmas, God becomes visible, God becomes observable, God becomes a physical presence in our world. And what I'm hoping for us is that today we can experience God's grace in a couple of ways...

1. work on getting our mind and heart put right, so as we encounter a busy, demanding season, we can do it with a heart and mind that are in the right place, focused on the right thing.
2. we can do some preparation to limit the spiritual and material distractions, so that throughout this season, we can see God at work in the world.

In order for us to get our heart and mind put right, I think these are ways that we live that are the opposite of purity of heart...

James, one of Jesus' followers, describes the opposite of purity of heart in his letter to an early Christian church. He wrote: **[slide] – “...he who doubts is like a wave on the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man... (James 1:6-8)**

So let's take a look at double-mindedness. What does James mean? How is being double-minded the opposite of a pure heart and how is it that we do it?

There's a lot we can say about being double-minded, in fact Soren Kirkegaard (a Danish theologian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) thought being double minded was the fundamental disease of the human spirit. And the two basic ways we engage in double-mindedness can be described as fractured focus and mixed motives.

**Fractured focus** is a life marked by ambivalence – being both pushed and pulled. When we live a life of fractured focus, we both desire intimacy with God and flee from it. We long to be generous, but we also hoard and covet. We attempt to be servants, and also are driven by arrogance and self-serving. Even the apostle Paul faced this struggle: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

The challenge of a fractured focus is with us all the time, but it seems exaggerated during Christmas. In our culture, there may not be a time in the whole year that has a more fractured focus. The simple story of Jesus' birth is drowned out by a host of other voices competing for your attention. From the north pole to Madison avenue, seems like everyone wants us to tell us what Christmas should mean for us. Our calendars get divided and fractured as various interests (some selfish) compete for our time. I have always experienced Christmas as a time of fractured focus.

**Mixed motives** is similar, but it adds a tone of falsehood and deception. In mixed motives, there is a discrepancy between the reasons we give for doing something and the *real* reasons why we are doing it. We gossip to tear someone down so we can feel superior, but we do it in the name of “knowing what to pray for”. We say something that

sounds humble, but secretly we know that we are trying to impress people with our apparent humility.

Again, we experience this spiritual struggle all the time, and especially at Christmas. You're a better person than me if you've never had an ulterior motive for choosing who gets a gift, or why you choose the gift you did. Or why you went to the office party when you really didn't want to. Have you ever given a gift hoping to impress not just the one who received it, but everyone else in the room too? Oh yeah, I think there are politics even in giving.

Mixed motives and fractured focus divide us and split out our experience of the celebration of Jesus' birth. We find ourselves, often too late in the game, scattered in too many directions, or being pulled into a conflict over the real motives for doing something and the motives we want others to believe. And this is what James was talking about when he uses the image of a person being like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

And these are the things that keep us from having purity of heart. These are the sins that place a barrier between God and us, and keep us from experiencing the fullness of life he desires to share with us. This is the fundamental disease of the human spirit that Kirkegaard talked about. This is the double-mindedness James wants us to recognize.

This is where we often are. And I'm just recognizing from my experiences, that double-mindedness is often a theme even in the most spiritually fulfilling Christmases of my past. And if I don't recognize it now and repent of it and learn from it and invite God to lead me into a new way of life, then I'm pretty sure that this coming Christmas is not going to be much different. It will be a good Christmas, maybe even wonderful in some ways, but it will be a divided Christmas.

There is good news! With God's help, we can grow toward a purity of heart, not just for Christmas, but for all of life. And today we're going to look at 2 things we can do to get on the **pathway to purity of heart**.

### **1. Place your focus on the right one thing!**

If a fractured focus is the problem, then we address it by placing the focus where it should be. I know that I have a limited amount of focus. And I can feel it when I try to place what little focus I have in too many directions.

In the movie, *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal plays Mitch, a confused, dissatisfied thirty-something character with a vague sense that life is passing him by. He is torn between his obligation to his family and his desire for career advancement; between his need for security and his appetite for excitement. He is divided somehow. His life is about so many things, and so, he senses, it is about nothing.

Curly, the trail boss, is an ancient, leathery man who is wise to the ways of the world. He and Mitch have a talk about the secret of life.

### **Play movie clip**

The disease of fractured focus is about the failure to achieve simplicity – failure to have a life that is integrated, that is focused on one thing. Curly said we have to figure out what the one thing on our own. Now that's not quite right. Some of us might end up choosing the wrong "one thing", kinda like Clark Griswold and his house of 100,000 **[slide – picture of Chevy Chase]** lights on Christmas Vacation. Come to think of it, that whole movie is about the things that compete for our attention at Christmas.

Anyway, Jesus tells us exactly what that one thing needs to be for us if we are going to follow him. **[Slide] “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...”**  
**Matthew 6:33**

Purity of heart comes through simplicity and focus on the one thing that is most important. The author of Hebrews put it this way, **[slide] Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... Hebrews 12:4**

The right one place for us to focus on, not just for Christmas, but for life is Jesus and the kingdom of God he came to establish. For the Christian, Jesus is the One thing.

So place our focus on the right one thing, and  
**2. Align our motives to move in one direction.**

There is a lot in the Bible about God's people all having the same motives and moving in the same direction as a church, but today, I'm really talking about aligning our interior motives.

I loved playing baseball, and as an adult, softball. One of the things you're taught early on in the game is to know where you are going with the ball if it's hit to you. If you don't determine ahead of time and align your thoughts, then when the ball is hit to you, your body reacts to the confusion in your mind and you're unable to make the play.

The same thing is true for life. For us to have purity of heart, to avoid mixed motives, we need to determine ahead of time what our true motivation is. And again, Jesus gives us a pretty good idea of what that motivation should be.

**[slide] In Luke 9:23, Jesus says, “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and FOLLOW ME!”**

Our motives should move in the direction of taking up crosses and following Jesus. Here's what that means to me. The cross was a symbol of shame, but through his resurrection, Jesus turns the cross into a symbol that reflects God's glory. And everything that Jesus did was about giving praise and glory to God. Jesus wants to lead us into a life that glorifies God, or points to God's greatness, not ours.

So we need to do some soul searching and invite Jesus to come into our house (heart) and do an extreme makeover! Let Jesus re-align our reasons for living and doing what we do with his motive of giving praise and glory to God.

Since we are just at the start of this Christmas season, I'd like to share a few simple **practical ways to experience an undivided Christmas**: ways to keep our focus and align our motives with God.

**1. Stay tuned-in to God through worship.** Worship is one of the ways that God uses to refocus and realign our hearts and minds. Even if you are traveling, commit to being in worship each week.

**2. Evaluate your motives.** Ahead of time, this week, recall your experiences from Christmases past and honestly name the motives behind the traditions you participate in, the events you attend, and the gifts you gave. This will give you a chance to maybe see where you've been double-minded in the past, and do something about it.

**3. Consciously and verbally connect your Christmas activities to Jesus and the celebration of his birth.** As you are participating, remind yourself and share with your family, especially your children, how this activity relates to the birth of Jesus. For example, before you open Christmas gifts, share that the tradition of gift-giving comes from the celebration of God's great gift to us of Jesus.

**4. Budget your Christmas spending, AND use part of your Christmas budget as a gift for God.** You already know that an unbelievable amount of money is spent this time of year. Set a Christmas gift budget that is within your means and stick to it. Don't forget that it is important to set part of that budget aside for God's purposes. There is a wide variety of ways to make a gift to God in this season, including the Gift tree, our church's Christmas wish list, through a local ministry that serves the needy. One idea for the people who have everything is to make a gift in their name to a ministry.

**5. Do Less to Experience More.** Keep your focus and avoid distracting activities. Set up your calendar now, and choose not to fill every evening with something. Make your choices and say "no" to some things. I remember a Christmas about 3 or 4 years ago when we lived in Fredericktown. It snowed out school for like the entire week before Christmas. All kinds of events were cancelled. We weren't running wildly from one event to another. It remains one of the most relaxed, focused, enjoyable and meaningful Christmases I can remember. But don't wait for mother nature to do it for you, you take charge!

**CLOSING:** Invite you recognize your double-mindedness. Does your life have a fractured focus? Do you live out of mixed motives? Spend some time now, at the beginning of the season, to focus your heart and mind, and align your motives, so that you can experience not just an undivided Christmas, but also life with a purer heart.

And may Jesus' promise to you be fulfilled....[slide] **“blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they shall see God.”**