

Sunday, December 24, 2023

## Will Worship (Colossians 2:23)

When I was in middle school, a friend of mine asked me why I didn't celebrate Christmas. I said, "The Bible never tells us to celebrate Christmas." He responded with, "The Bible also doesn't say anything about potatoes. So should we not be eating potatoes?" As a middle school child, his response seemed like an unassailable, airtight argument to me, and I didn't have any idea how to answer it. So, I thought about it for a few moments and eventually said something like, "well, if somebody turned eating potatoes into a religious holiday, then you shouldn't be eating potatoes." That appeased the kid, and he went on to another topic. But people are still asking the same question today, so I thought it might be helpful to go over some of the foundational reasons for why it is a sin to celebrate Christmas. It's easy to get into a mindset where you start thinking this isn't a big deal. "Are we making a mountain out of a molehill?" But this is not a minor issue – it strikes right at the heart of the church's worship of God, where our lives ought to be characterized by adoring, magnifying, obeying, submitting to, glorifying, and giving reverence to Him. When the church meets and we sing, pray, baptize, observe the Lord's Supper, and hear the word preached, we are worshipping God. These are the things He told us to do. And it is not a spectator sport – everyone ought to be actively engaged. Remember, the church does not belong to us; it belongs to Christ. He determines what type of worship is pleasing to Him. If we add to that or diminish from it, it is sin.

**What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. (Deuteronomy 12:32)**

This is the principle that was laid down in the law of Moses. And God, who doesn't change, has the same standard today in the New Testament church. In matters of worshipping God, we don't have the liberty to add our own innovations or improvements to what He's said. We don't have the liberty to reject or minimize what He's said. We don't have the liberty to modify what He's said to suit our own tastes. If you are going to attach any religious significance to something, you better make sure that you are standing on rock solid Biblical ground and are not adding your own inventions; otherwise, it is sin. It is will-worship:

**Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)**

There's a general principle here and Gill has a good summary of it: *"whatever is of man, and not of God, in religious worship, ought to be rejected."* Man-made commandments and doctrines can sound so wise, so humble, so pious. They often have plausible-sounding explanations, with only the most holy of intentions. Some sound so reasonable, you almost feel like an ogre to question them. But don't be deceived - it is "will worship." JFB says this about will-worship: *"arbitrarily invented worship: would-be worship, devised by man's own will, not God's. So jealous is God of human will-worship, that He struck Nadab and Abihu dead for burning strange incense (Leviticus 10:1-3). So Uzziah was stricken with leprosy for usurping the office of priest (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Compare the will-worship of Saul (1 Samuel 13:8-14) for which he was doomed to lose his throne."* Whenever mankind invents their own forms of worship, it will be man-centered, it will dishonor God, and it will anger God. It doesn't matter how well-intentioned or harmless or innocent it seems, it will lead to more sin. Guaranteed. There is a legal term called *Obsta Principiis*. It means to resist the beginnings. Resist the first encroachments. Nip it in the bud. If you allow the snake's head in, the body is sure to follow.

Now, I would like to say a couple things up front. First, you have to understand the difference between what God has shown us in the scripture by way of command and example and principle vs. the things that are incidental to those commands and examples and principles. Looking at the Lord's Supper might help explain what I'm talking about. He commanded us to keep the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Him. He told us how to do it, down to the details of one loaf of unleavened bread and one cup of wine. Those are the commands – I don't understand why anyone would want to mess with that, but most do. The incidentals would be the necessary things that go along with those commands. For example, He told us to keep the Lord's Supper, but He didn't tell us how often to keep it – so we use our discretion to schedule it. He told us to use one loaf of unleavened bread, but He didn't tell us the exact recipe to use – so we use a recipe that produces one loaf of unleavened bread. He told us to use one cup of wine, but He didn't tell us what size of cup to use – so we make sure we have a cup that's big enough to suit the needs of the body. What He did NOT give us liberty to do is change the things He specifically told us to do (no grape juice and wafers!), or to add/remove elements to/from it, or to add a new ordinance altogether as if the one He gave us isn't sufficient!

Second, this is a topic that can very quickly degenerate into spiritual pride. "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). I think that God has corrected us on issues related to holidays as well as other issues, so we ought not to hold others to a standard that we would be crushed under. That doesn't mean that we should back down one iota from preaching against this sin – but a spirit of humility should be the order of the day. Another way pride and works-righteousness could show itself is in

becoming so obsessed with the form or the minute details of our worship of God that we forget that the reason behind it all is that we love God. I've said it before – sometimes you can get so busy worshipping and serving God that you forget God. If we love Him, we'll want to worship Him in the way that He told us to worship Him, and that will be sufficient for us.

So, the question is, why is it a sin to celebrate Christmas? There are a lot of good answers to that question (some stronger than others), so I'm going to give you six that I can think of:

1. God is not pleased when we worship Him differently than He commanded us to.
2. There are no commands in scripture to celebrate Christmas.
3. Not only is Christmas not commanded, it is positively forbidden.
4. Christmas is based on lies.
5. Man-made traditions destroy the church.
6. The world loves Christmas.

### **God is not pleased when we worship Him differently than He commanded us to**

This is the testimony of scripture from cover to cover. It is an insult to Him because it suggests that He's not competent enough to appoint His own worship. Man-made religious traditions or self-styled forms of worship are frequently met with the wrath and displeasure of God. I could multiply examples (Cain, Nadab and Abihu, Saul, Uzzah, Uzziah, the Pharisees, several of the churches in Revelation 2-3, etc.) but let's look a little closer at just two:

**And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. (Leviticus 10:1-2)**

Whatever "strange fire" means, the key is that they did something in the public worship of God that God did not command them to do. This shows the propensity of human beings to not be satisfied with what God told us to do – we either have contempt for it, irreverence for it, carelessness with regard to it, we assign little importance to it, or we think that we're smart enough to change it according to our own wisdom. You may have noticed that this scene with Nadab and Abihu happened right out of the gate – it was the very day after the priests had been consecrated. The very first thing they did was the wrong thing.

**And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drave the new cart...And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and**

**took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. (2 Sam. 6:3, 6-7)**

Uzzah was probably well-intentioned here. It doesn't seem like he's doing this in bold defiance toward God. Of course, they were supposed to bear the ark on their shoulders, but they used a cart instead. He probably didn't think it was a big deal – after all, the ark would get from point A to point B no matter how it was transported, right? And when the cart started to shake, he nobly reached out to steady it so it wouldn't fall, right? These look like the actions of a pragmatic man, who has some reverence for the sanctity of the ark. But what he did was absolutely unacceptable to God. It doesn't matter how well-intentioned you are, and it doesn't matter how reverent you think you are; as soon as you stop following God's commandments and start doing your own thing, you're in trouble.

### **There are no commands in scripture to celebrate Christmas**

You can search high and low in the scripture and you will not find one word commanding us to celebrate the birth of Christ. It is a man-made addition, and a grievous one at that. God didn't command it. God didn't ordain it. In fact, it didn't even start to be celebrated until some 300 years after the ascension of Christ. Jesus told us to teach “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20) and Paul said, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27). This does not include Christmas, because there's not one jot or tittle about Christmas in the Bible.

We do have two God-ordained commandments, though, to remember our Lord – they are baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are the visible reminders of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. These are the ordinances through which God wants us to remember Him. Christmas usurps a role that belongs exclusively to these commands that God DID give.

Some people say that even though we're not commanded to do it, we have the liberty to make up our own holy days. But in the scripture, when a day is declared to be holy, it is God who does the declaring. He's the only one who has the right or the authority to determine what events are to be memorialized in a holy day of worship, and that's the pattern we see in scripture. We don't see humans manufacturing holy days. If men were allowed to create new holy days on a whim, where would it end? Catholics in the US have over 100 such days per year in their painful-to-read liturgical calendar (they call them “memorials”, “feasts”, “solemnities” and “holydays of obligation”). Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, etc., aren't much better. Paul said the following about trying to find salvation in keeping Old Testament holy days:

**Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain. (Galatians 4:10-11)**

Those days had been originally ordained by God and were shadows of Christ. How much more would these words apply to man-made holy days? Christmas is man-made, man-centered, man-glorifying. It is a return to the bondage of the covenant of works. E.g., we see a huge number of C&E Christians because the very existence of these holidays sends the message that if you come to church during the “holiest times of the year,” you’ll be right with God.

But what, one may say, about Romans 14:5? “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” This passage is talking about one who is weak in the faith thinking he needs to give special regard to the Old Testament holy days. It has nothing to do with creating new holy days out of whole cloth or joining and repurposing pagan holy days.

But what about Purim or Hannukah? Didn’t the Jews in Esther 9 institute Purim as a day of feasting and gladness to be memorialized each year? They did, but that doesn’t mean they did the right thing. Plenty of sin was going on in the book of Esther, and it is not insignificant that the name of God is not mentioned one time in that book. If you look at the clown show that Purim is today, you won’t find anything holy there. You’ll find drunkenness, mockery, vengeance, revelry. But no holiness. But what about Hannukah? Wasn’t Jesus in Jerusalem at the time that Hannukah was being celebrated in John 10:22? Yes, but so what? Just because He was present when a feast was going on doesn’t mean he was participating in it.

But what about the church gathering for purposes of thanksgiving or prayer? Can’t the church have special meetings? Of course! The church can meet whenever it wants to to thank God for something or to pray during times of trial or distress. But a meeting to thank or call upon God is a far cry from “I’m going to decree a new holy day, create new customs and traditions (or better yet, borrow pagan customs and traditions), and say that from henceforth, every year on this day, we will set time aside to have a special worship of God.”

### **Not only is Christmas not commanded, it is positively forbidden**

Christmas is full of idolatry and is therefore forbidden by the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment of the ten commandments:

**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous**

**God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)**

Since the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment is “thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), I don’t think God is repeating Himself in the second commandment. I think the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment has to do with how we worship God Himself, and we are forbidden from using idols to do it. We have a prime example of this in Exodus 32 with the golden calf incident. When Moses delayed coming down from the mount, the people demanded that a golden calf be fashioned to represent the “gods” that brought them up out of the land of Egypt. The next day, they had a wild feast that involved singing, dancing, and nakedness (not unlike the videos we saw coming out of Israel on October 7). This feast was “a feast to the LORD” (verse 5) – the word “LORD” being Jehovah! These people hadn’t fashioned an idol for some other god – they had fashioned an idol to supposedly worship the true and living God, Jehovah! Maybe they thought that the calf would represent the power and steadfastness of Jehovah, so what’s the big deal? It’s a visual reminder to help inflame my devotion to God, so how could it be a problem? I had a person tell me the other day that he loves the Santa Claus myth because his bag of gifts makes people remember the gift of Jesus, and the Christmas tree points up to heaven and makes him remember God, and the nativity scenes help him remember the baby Jesus coming into the world, so how could it be wrong? Well, besides being wrong because God told you not to do it, consider this: any image that you come up with to supposedly help you worship God is going to be skewed, insulting, inadequate, and different than what God actually is. It will hide His glory, misrepresent Him, make a caricature out of Him, and implant all manner of erroneous thinking into your minds about Him. “To whom then will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto him?” (Isaiah 40:18). There is no telling what other false doctrines and practices will be spawned by idolatry. These are not innocent things – you see how quickly the drama of the golden calf went downhill and what it resulted in. Don’t we see the same thing with Christmas? Just look at it! I saw a quote recently referring to Christmas as “Satan’s caricature of Christianity” and that is a true statement.

Furthermore, it’s not as though Christmas started off as a pure and holy thing that was just corrupted over time. It was corrupt from the get-go. Most people understand that for millennia, pagans have worshipped their sun gods around the date of the winter solstice, when the days start to become longer. Seeing this, the Catholic Church commandeered the date and the customs as a misguided missionary or evangelistic strategy. “If we can take all these existing customs and ‘Christianize’ them, then that’ll help us pander to these pagans. The only thing standing between them and being Christian is that they despise the Christ of the Bible and they love their idols, so let’s give them what they want, let Christ be palatable to them, compromise with them, let them gratify their self-indulgence and continue in their sins,

and then we can fill the church with ‘converts’ that we have won to Jesus.” You’ll see the same “missionary” argument today, that Christmas is a good time to try to win people to Jesus, because now that we’ve “Christianized” all these pagan customs and idols, we have people talking about Jesus, so we must strike while the iron is hot. In the Protestant Reformation, a lot of churches banned Christmas. But that could never last. The rabble wanted it, so the churches caved. It’s the same disease that has infected Christmas from the very beginning – “Give the people what they want so you can win them to Jesus.”

The problem here is that in the Bible, God never told us to take pagan customs and idols and “Christianize” them. Quite the opposite, in fact. He said, “Learn not the way of the heathen.” (Jeremiah 10:2). He never commanded that we assimilate pagan worship practices into our own; rather, He told the Jews to annihilate those things, and He told us in the church to separate ourselves from them and maintain sound doctrine.

**Thou shalt not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but thou shalt utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images. (Exodus 23:24)**

**Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. (Deuteronomy 12:30)**

**Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold: thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence. (Isaiah 30:22)**

**Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. (2 Corinthians 6:17)**

**For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)**

If the pagan idolatry wasn’t enough, add on top of that the Roman Catholic idolatry. The very name “Christmas” comes from “Christ-mass” or “the Mass of Christ.” The Catholic mass is a strange animal. It involves an altar which they bow down to and/or kiss, a priest who represents Christ and stands between everyone else and God, transubstantiation (where the bread and wine are turned into the literal body and blood of Christ), joining the bread and wine (plus cash donations) to the original sacrifice of Christ so it can be re-presented back as a sacrifice to God (because, like everything in Catholicism, Christ isn’t good enough – we have to

add our own works/merit to it). For Midnight Christmas Mass, they throw in a baby Jesus (halo and all) laying at the front of the church. It's all a blasphemous outrage.

So, most (if not all) Christmas customs have pagan origins (the date itself, gift-giving, candles, evergreen trees, mistletoe, etc.) and/or Catholic origins (nativity scenes, midnight mass, St. Nick, etc.). But even if Christmas had started off as a pure and holy thing that was allowed by God, it's full of idolatry and sin today, and we ought not to have anything to do with it. We see a principle with the brazen serpent that God told Moses to make. It started off as a good, God-ordained thing to teach us about Christ (compare Num. 21:8-9 to Jn. 3:14), but it turned into an idolatrous stumbling block, so Hezekiah "broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it." (2 Kin 18:4).

### **Christmas is based on lies**

It's almost embarrassing to bring up the date because it seems so petty, but nobody knows when Jesus was born, so it's a deception to say He was born on December 25. Dates from almost every month of the year have been proposed, but from what I've been able to find, the first recorded time that this date was celebrated as the birth of Christ was in 336AD – over 300 years after Jesus died. As I mentioned earlier, this date came from the Roman Catholic church commandeering pagan holidays and calling them "Christian." People have pointed out that it's very unlikely that He was born in the winter at all (why would Augustus have called for a census in the dead of winter, when it was most difficult to travel -Luke 2:1? Why were the shepherds out in the fields "keeping watch over their flock by night" in the middle of winter - Luke 2:8?), but the more important point is that God never told us when He was born. If He wanted us to celebrate that date, you'd think He would have told us the date! Instead, like Jeroboam, this is a day which they devised of their own heart (1 Kings 12:33). It seems like a small thing, but it's a lie. If you're going to lie and obfuscate the truth about small things, why would anyone believe you about big things? (Luke 16:10 – "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much."). And in fact, churches today habitually lie and withhold or obfuscate the truth about many matters, big and small, because you can't win people to Jesus if you tell them the whole counsel of God.

And what about Santa Claus? How many "Christians" do we have telling their children that Santa Claus knows whether you've been naughty or nice and is going to come give you presents if you were good little boys and girls? This isn't just ridiculous – it teaches the false gospel of works-righteousness; it teaches children false notions about God. These are the things that the children will look back on with fond memories and nostalgia. Their childhood memories will be full of idolatry and lies – "Their children remember their altars and their groves by the green trees upon the high hills." (Jeremiah 17:2).



And the lie that Jesus is the reason for the season. Is He? He is not. Nobody has any right to take a pagan holiday and stamp the name of Christ on it, and you can't put Christ back into Christmas because He was never there in the first place. The reason for the season is idolatry and a thing called "syncretism" – where you try to merge different religious practices and doctrines into one so you can make everyone happy:

**So these nations feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day. (2 Kings 17:41)**

The more invested people are in trying to force this thing to be "Christian," the more they will feel obligated to defend it, and the more ridiculous the lies and explanations become. I've heard some doozies, up to and including rewriting history to say that from the very beginning, it was Christian. "The yule log was always about Christ being the light of the world – the Vikings just didn't realize it until some missionaries came and told them." Churches nowadays have whole theologies built on top of how these pagan customs and practices are actually Christian, and that God has sanctified the pagan practices for holy use.

### **Man-made traditions destroy the church**

**But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?...Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. (Matthew 15:3, 7-9)**

Man-made religious traditions are a very dangerous thing, and Christmas is based 100% on tradition, not scripture. Traditions will always tend to usurp the commandments of God. Men are very zealous to defend their own contrivances – far more zealous than they are in defending the commandments of God. As I hinted above, once you get heavily invested in a tradition of your own making, it's very difficult to let it go. You might think they're innocent at first, but you will always end up assigning more importance to them than what God says, even to the point of disobeying God. Once a tradition becomes entrenched, each generation adds its own twist to it. And what is the end of it? I cite the Roman Catholic Church as Exhibit A. Is anyone really surprised that a thing built on idolatry, blasphemy and man-made traditions would, for example, say that God now blesses same-sex unions? That's what the Pope did last week, and the only thing that surprised me was that it took him so long to do it. This is the so-called "Vicar of Christ" (they say that this means he has "supreme and universal primacy, both of honor and jurisdiction, over the Church of Christ"). "Vicar" means "substitute" – the Pope claims to stand in the stead of Christ, having the same authority and power over the church as

Christ does. Can you imagine the Lord Jesus Christ doing such a thing, putting His blessing on sin? That same Pope's mouth that pronounced a blessing on sodomy is scheduled to pronounce some more blessings tonight, and then lay those same lips on a baby Jesus idol.

This truth about traditions is a general truth, and Christ's warning applies to all of us. Traditions are deceitful little viruses that can imperceptibly embed themselves into the body. Next thing you know, you'll look up one day and find yourself trying to shoehorn some Biblical meaning into some doctrine or practice that is manifestly wrong because "that's the way we've always done it."

### The world loves Christmas

They tell me "it's the most wonderful time of the year." It's a time of commercialism, mirth, sentimentalism, superstitious "miracles", temporary warm feelings and generosity, revelry, drunkenness, etc. It encourages/glorifies covetousness and false notions about God (especially in children). Hugh Latimer said, "*Men dishonour Christ more in the 12 days of Christmas, than in all the 12 months besides.*" If Christmas was Biblical, the world would hate it:

**But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)**

**For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. (John 3:20)**

**Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. (James 4:4)**

Jesus Christ did not come to spread holiday cheer, or to help companies meet target sales for the year, or to roast chestnuts on an open fire while children wait for Santa, or to help Mariah Carey find someone to fornicate with, or to give you a Red Ryder BB Gun, or to play the starring role in some ridiculous nativity scene or Christmas light show. He came, Paul says, "to save sinners; of whom I am chief." (1 Timothy 1:15). Jesus said, "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division." (Luke 12:51). The world doesn't want to hear that they are sinners who require a Savior. The world doesn't want to hear about how Christ is the focal point of division – nobody gets to stay on the fence. The world doesn't want to hear that He has a sword that divides into two camps – the saved and the unsaved. But the world does love their Christmas, and the more "devout" they are, the more they despise you for not taking part.

**Save yourselves from this untoward generation. (Acts 2:40)**