



The Clash of the Kingdoms: Matthew 2:1-9

Black Friday 2011: Was a day where people made the news, not for their holiday cheer, but for their greed, fueled by consumerism.

- A woman outside a LA Wal-Mart, pepper sprayed twenty people, so she could grab an X Box 360. In the midst of the chaos, she somehow managed to grab the game, check out at the register, and drive home with the X-Box in hand.
- A man outside a San Leandro, California, Wal-Mart, was shot when two armed suspects demanded his family's purchases. They refused, engaged in a fight, and he took a bullet for it.

Last night I watched a documentary called, "What would Jesus Buy" which chronicled the ministry of a church whose sole purpose was to get people to stop shopping.

In one of the stories, there was a couple where the husband proclaimed he did not believe in using credit cards....little did he know his wife had not only applied for some; but she maxed them out. When asked why, she mentioned that she loves her children and wants them to have the things she never had as a child. The underlying message is that if you really love your kids, you must buy their affection, even at the expense of going into debt.

At Christmas, we do not personalize gifts anymore; instead, we take orders like we are going through a drive thru. Our children, our siblings, our significant others, our spouses, tell us what they want and in some cases, even the color. The phrase, "Merry Christmas" has been replaced with a question: "What do you want for Christmas?" Many people will stress this Christmas because they have no idea what to buy someone.

The Impact of Christmas on the Church: We live in an Empire built on consumerism. The Christmas holiday has not only gripped those outside the church, but those within. Many times, you cannot distinguish between God's people and the culture. 1. We become obsessed finding the best deals. 2. We tell people what we want as gifts. 3. We spend money we do not have. The only difference is we go to Candlelight service and we read the Christmas story before we open our presents. 4. Then there is the issue of Santa and our children. We go along with the cultures exaggeration. We do not tell them there was a real man like St. Nicholas....

- Who was a real bishop in the fifth century
- Who really loved Jesus and voted for his deity at the Council of Nicaea
- Who really gave to the poor

We embrace the cultures lie that he is a fat man in a Santa suit, who promises he will give the gift of their choice as long as they are not naughty, but nice.

The Collision of Two Empires: If you look at the origins of consumerism and Christmas, all you have to do is look back at a time when there were two empires collided, the empire of Herod, and that of Jesus. In Matthew 2, we see the response to this collision of opposing forces.

Matthew 2:1-9

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

If you read the rest of the story, you realize that angels tell the Magi not to go back to Herod. Herod is so troubled by this that he orders all the young boys under two be put to death in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt because of his madness and do not return until Herod's death. It is the after effect of the collision if two empires. So who exactly is Herod?

Herod: His Background

- He was appointed King of Judea by the Romans, the emperor at the time was Augustus
- He was a puppet king, not a king chosen by the people
- He was a political king who had a good standing with Rome because of the flourishing economy in Judea and the magnificent structures he oversaw.

His Insecurity

1. He had 45 members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, killed to consolidate his power.
2. He appointed his wife's brother, the High Priest, but had him killed because he became popular
3. He had his own wife killed after he charged her with 29 counts of adultery and plots to kill him
4. Of course, since he killed his wife, his mother-in-law, also had to die.
5. He killed his three sons by his wife
6. As mentioned, when Jesus was born, he had all the boys two years and under in Bethlehem killed.

Herod was so paranoid and suspicious of everyone that he killed off any potential threat to his kingdom. Another reason Herod was king was that he was good at politicizing.

His Politicizing Nature

To the Romans

- He built Stadiums, theaters, bath houses, and magnificent palaces
- He built grand fortresses like Masada and Herodias, even port cities like Caesarea.
- He did everything he could to show Rome his allegiance, today, you can still see the remains of his incredible building projects

To the Jews

- In order to appease the Jewish leaders, he adhered to Jewish dietary regulations, including not eating pork. The Roman Emperor, Augustine once said, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son".
- He reconstructed the temple to be not only spiritual, but also financially lucrative.
- He supersized the temple mount so it covered the entire northern ridge of Mount Moriah
- He made it convenient to purchase commodities. The Jews who came for the three annual festivals could now purchase their sacrificial animals from the temple courts itself.

The Bad News for Herod:

His heritage: He was not really by the Jewish leaders. They considered him a half Jew, since he was part Arab, and not wholly committed to the faith. He liked material things too much. He was big into indoctrinating Jerusalem into the Hellenistic lifestyle, which centered on indulgence and Greek literature, and Roman deities.

Politically he was known as the king of the Jews, and worshipped God in a generic sense, but this caused theological difficulties because the Jewish people had long been awaiting the real King of the Jews, the Messiah, we know as Jesus.

Yet, Herod and his empire was in complete control until the day the baby was born.

- Then this poor peasant boy born in the unimpressive city of Bethlehem, amidst animals and dung, shows up and starts a revolution by flipping over the tables at the temple because he was appalled that God's people mixed the worship of God with consumerism.

The Reality of Nice Stuff: God is not impressed with generic religion. He is not impressed with consumerism, financial portfolios, and super-sized worship centers that take the focus off Him and place it on the facility. He is not impressed with a skyline filled with skyscrapers or the best military equipment man can invent.

We are the only ones impressed by these things.

- the architectural masterpieces
- the latest techno gadgets
- the credit limit on our credit cards

Today: Herod's Philosophy still Present:

Herod the king may be gone, but the Herodian politicized philosophy lives within every one of us. Our empire is one of capitalism and commercialism. In our culture, we are praised according to what we own. We believe the bumper sticker that says, "**He who has the most toys, wins.**"

Yes, Herod is still alive and well within our culture, particularly on Christmas. It is estimated we will spend over **450 billion dollars on Christmas alone this year in America**. Many of the major chain stores we love will outsource their production to other countries where they pay folks in India and China, a whopping 16 cents an hour, with some working as much as 96 hours a week.

We love the cheap sticker prices, we love our bargains, but we are ignorant as to why they are as cheap in the first place. We are benefiting from their sweat-labor.

I have a confession to make. I am primarily, one of these consumers. I have always lived for the great deal. I go home and rejoice at my thrifty purchases, feeling good about myself because I saved some bucks.

What's the Point: Now, I am not suggesting we do not buy stuff this Christmas season. I am advocating that we buy less. When we buy, let's remember what Jesus stood for in life. You see, the very thing Jesus stood for was a threat to the empire of consumerism.

How did Jesus respond to the Herodian political climate of his day? Like I mentioned, the empire of Herod does not like threats to its kingdom.

Recall what happened to John the Baptist. He called out a king because he was committing fornication with his brother's wife. Ultimately, John was thrown into jail and later beheaded because the king's daughter wanted a gift, John's head. The Empire of Consumerism and self-indulgence does not like to be challenged. So how should we respond? Notice Jesus in Luke 13:31-33

Luke 13:31-33

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

32 And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'

33 Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.'

You see, Jesus knows he is going to die, but he has a mission. He will not run and hide from the "fox" because it will bring him safety. No, he has a mission and his focus is on helping and healing people, until it is time for him to die. He was not interested in having the biggest house, or the most toys, he was interested in giving himself to people. He belonged to a different kingdom. We must ask ourselves this Christmas, what empire will we serve? We must evaluate what kind of hold the Herodian empire has on our lives?

Entering into the Nativity:

My challenge is that rather than looking at a nativity scene with your family, how about entering into the nativity scene. How about living the nativity scene, not just admiring others who endure the cold for your entertainment. Look how Jesus entered into the nativity story. Turn to Luke 23:8-9.

Luke 23:8-9.

8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

9 So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.

Keep in mind, contextually here, Jesus has been beaten. He is about to be crucified. Yet, Herod's son wants to be entertained. "Do some miracles for me so I can get something from you." That is consumerism. It does not matter that injustice is before him; what matters is that Jesus does something to make him happy. It does not matter that we spend money at the mall and nationwide chains, which employ people for 16 cents an hour. What matters is that I am happy.

Yet here, Jesus ignores the consumer mentality. He knows what his mission is and he will not let anything detour him. He is not interested in blending in with culture.

My Mother and Christmas

Many of you know, my mother passed away on the wee hours of Wednesday morning. As her five boys stood around her bedside, we prayed, we played her favorite YouTube music videos, and we recalled many stories. Some of those revolved around Christmas.

We always felt our mom was cheap, and out of touch with the cultural expectations, on Christmas. I think some of that was definitely true. We never received anything fancy. It seemed every year we received white tube socks, Old Spice Cologne, and red turtleneck sweaters we would never wear.

Meanwhile, one of my childhood friends, whose family had less money than us, had the latest fashions, the most exciting video games. How did they thrive every Christmas? My buddy's mom used credit cards and was content paying the minimum. Yet, I always envied the gifts he received for Christmas. I always envied the expensive clothes he received at the beginning of every school year.

As far as I can remember, my mother never had a credit card. Therefore, when she shopped, she only bought what she could afford.

- She could of had some credit cards.
- She could have bought into the consumerism of culture.

Yet she ignored the offer to make us happy by overspending and getting us what we wanted. The tradition at our house became one with fellowship and food, not the gifts. Every year, my mom bought fifty dollars worth of German cold cuts, rolls, and candy, and we ate together as a family. We will remember those Christmas, not for what we received, but for the family eating and thoroughly enjoying those German cold cuts, while hearing Joy to the world playing in the background.

When I was older, I tried to make up for our lack of Christmas presents. I would go shopping for my younger brothers and buy expensive gifts I could not afford by charging them on my credit card. I had bought into the consumerism that says, I am willing to show you I love you by going into debt for you. I will give you the things I never had as a child. Little did I know those expensive gifts would last but a season.

Our Response: Like Jesus, we have to ignore the temptation to blend into our consumer empire.

- Evaluate what you can afford.
- Be willing to shut off the cable.
- Turn off the television and all its marketing schemes.
- Ignore the temptation to charge the credit card.
- Ignore these temptations and invest your money and time into something different.

This Christmas, take time out to think about the empire of Jesus. What would Jesus stand for today, this Christmas? It does not mean you cannot shop; it is engrained in us. It just means that you will learn to think differently as you enter into the nativity scene. Be consumed by another kingdom. The Jesus kingdom.

We need to worship more

We need to spend less

We need to give more

We need to love all.

Buy one Less Gift: My challenge for Northside this Christmas is to buy at least one less expensive gift, and use that money to contribute to a special Christmas offering. I also want to take a special offering on December 18th. With that offering, we will use it to give to the Living Water Foundation. This will help with the goal of getting people living in third world countries, wells with clean water. What I don't want you to do is use your credit cards and spend money you do not have. I do encourage you to make your giving a sacrifice.

Help Purchase Clean Water: Many people in Africa and surrounding nations have to walk miles to get water, and then have to return back for more, three or four times a day. Many young people cannot go to school because they have to fetch water on a daily basis for their family, three to four times a day. Furthermore, the water they fetch is not clean. More people die of disease, from unclean water than any one in a war dies by guns. Several churches have collaborated up in this Advent Conspiracy and we want to join them. I hope you will enter into this nativity scene.

Give More of your Time: I also want to encourage you to give more of your time this Christmas season, as opposed to your money this Christmas season. Spend time with your children and grandchildren. Teach them to think about the importance of giving water to others, instead of giving you a list about what they want this Christmas. Finally, make heirlooms that can be passed down in your family for generations to come. Make cards. Construct gifts from crafts. Use your money to buy food and be with family and worship the kingdom of Jesus, not the kingdom of Herod.

- Worship More
- Spend Less
- Give more (your presence and needs for others)
- Love all.

That is what it means to experience the nativity scene today this Christmas season. Focus on the kingdom of Jesus and you will establish lifelong memories tomorrow where you truly made a difference.