

Series: GREAT CHRISTMAS CLASSICS – Sunday December 2, 2007

SCROOGED!

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25

I. INTRO

- A. I have discovered over the years that a single phone call, a single email, a single conversation—can change your life forever. Sometimes that happens and it's for the better. Someone asks you on a date; you get a letter of acceptance from a university; you get called into the boss's office—and offered a promotion.

-And sometimes it goes the **other** way. Last year I got two phone calls from my brother on a Sunday, six months apart. The first said, "...Dad's...gone." The second said, "...Mom's gone." Most of us have had a call that is a messenger of tough news. If you haven't...just wait.

-But sometimes the call, the messenger, the message—is a choice. There's a fork in the road—and each road leads to a destination. One road is usually easier than the other. But we have to choose—and our future hangs in the balance.

-The story, ***A Christmas Carol***, by Charles Dickens—is a story like that. A guy named Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by a ghost from the past—and quite suddenly and unexpectedly—he's confronted with himself and the inevitable conclusion of his life if there's no change.

1. Most of you have probably at least seen the movie, **Scrooge**, or **A Christmas Carol**. Ebenezer Scrooge is an old, angry, mean tightfisted man who has made a fortune through shrewd business deals.

For Scrooge, money he's made and hoarded is the bottom line in life; people are obstacles.

-And he hates Christmas. He hates it because charities bug him about giving money—and because he has to give Bob Cratchet, his clerk, a day's wages for no work. To him, Christmas is...say it with me, **Bah! Humbug! Watch this clip.**

2. But as you study this story, you realize that Ebenezer Scrooge's problem really isn't that he doesn't like Christmas. His problem is that he loves money...and can't stand people. Money is his god. In fact, money is the coffin his heart has suffocated in—and he really doesn't give a rip about anyone.
3. On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is terrorized by a visit from a ghost—the spirit of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. And he is warned that money and business is **not** the point of life; people are. That he is chained to his money. Marley tells him that this is his one chance to alter his destiny.

-And so Scrooge gets three visitors. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows him the influences that have wounded and shriveled his heart.

-The Ghost of Christmas Present opens Scrooge's eyes to the people he's walked right by, the need he's totally ignored—and the joy he's forfeited because of his blind eyes and hard heart.

-The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is the creepiest of all. And Scrooge comes face to face with his inevitable fate—the fate of a person who lives with a petrified heart.

3. And there kneeling in the darkness by his canopy bed, this bitter, selfish, cruel old man calls out to God for a second chance. And he gets it. This clip is probably one of the best known parts of this film.

VIDEO CLIP (Scrooge - a changed man).

-And according to the story, the change in Ebenezer Scrooge is real. He invests the remaining years of his life—and his money—in others.

- B. **A Christmas Carol** is a story filled with messengers who reveal the unseen, explain the past and warn about things to come. **The** Christmas story is also filled with messengers. We call them angels. They came to prepare all the main players in the Christmas story. See, they have to be ready for their part in God's radical move to make everything right on this planet by sending His Son, Jesus.

1. God's Son, that baby lying in the manger at the very center of the Christmas story not only **gave** God's message; He **was** God's message. One witness, John, says **the Word became flesh and lived among us**. The message was that the God of the Universe so loved and valued people, He was going to interrupt the course of history and offer everyone a second chance. A second chance to value what's **truly** valuable. To offer a transformation for people deeply set in their ways.
2. And this morning, that message comes to you. I hope you hear what God is saying!

III. **BLINDNESS...AND INCONVENIENT TRUTH**

- A. In preparing for this message, I not only re-watched the movie, **A Christmas Carol**; I re-read the story. I actually picked up details I had never noticed before. For example, Jacob Morley's chain. Did you ever notice that it wasn't just a chain—but was a whole series of cash boxes, deeds and ledgers made of steel?

-When he said he forged it link by link and yard by yard—it makes sense. Money was what his life was about—it **was** his life—and now he was **chained** to it. He had been blind his whole life to the misery of others—and now he was condemned to walk the earth and feel the weight of a life that had been wasted.

1. What I realized as I thought through this story is that it's actually about a man who has lived totally for himself, oblivious—blind--to people devastated by need, poverty, brokenness, starvation and homelessness. Their need compared to his greed became particularly obvious at Christmas. And when he was asked to help—his hatred and contempt becomes particularly clear.

Watch this clip.

VIDEO CLIP

-Now, how could **anyone** make a comment that callous, that chilling? It's because Scrooge had carefully insulated himself from their suffering; that they

were real, flesh and blood people with hearts, lives and souls. He thinks life is all about business.

-There's a conversation that highlights Scrooges twisted view of life. Right in the middle of Jacob Morley's regrets about his blindness to human need and tragedy, Scrooge pays him what he thinks is the ultimate compliment "You've always had a good mind for business, Jacob." At this, Jacob explodes, "**Business! Mankind was** my business." "The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were **all** my business! The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the **comprehensive ocean of my business!**"

2. Throughout this movie, Ebenezer Scrooge's superior opinion of himself—supported by the money he's made--crumbles. His heart is broken by the opportunities he's missed, the arrogance he's lived with—and how he has ignored the poor, broken, sick and marginalized all around him.
-And in the transformation of his heart, he something that has always eluded him. Joy. Happiness. The ability to take delight in doing good. When the gold cataracts are surgically removed from his eyes, it was like he was seeing people—and delighting in them—for the very first time. And, in the story at least, it's a permanent change.
3. I recently heard someone say that if Scrooge lived today, given how we celebrate Christmas, he would be one of Christmas's biggest fans. Maybe own a chain of Wal-Marts—and walk up and down the aisles wishing people a Merry Christmas. Now, why would anyone say something like that?
-Well, when you think about it, what Scrooge hated most about Christmas is that it 'picked his pocket'—took a business day—a day for making **more** money--out of his calendar. In Victorian England, the time when this movie was set, Christmas was a time to sing, visit people, play games and feast. What **wasn't** a big part was gift-giving. Gifts were mainly given to children—and they fit in a stocking! Hung by the chimney...with care..
4. These days, Christmas is **huge** business. I heard some recent stats that New York City **alone** spent \$4.9 billion on Christmas. And for \$3.5 billion, they could buy homes for all the homeless. I've read that department stores, in particular, do up to 50% of their business in the Christmas season. I think Scrooge would've been **all over** Christmas.

-Jesus once told a story about a farmer who jammed his barns full of grain. And even though he was surrounded by need, the only solution he could come up with to all his excess—was to build **bigger** barns. Jesus called him a fool—but, in our world, the **Gospel of the Bigger Barn** is growing like crazy! The Gospel of the Bigger Barn says that **more** always has to be accommodated, protected and promoted. In the Gospel of the Bigger Barns, money is god—and anything that dares touch it—like human need—is religiously ignored—**or** ruthlessly eliminated!

B. Let me tell you why I think this story/movie has lasted as it has. It really gets to the core of why we would ever celebrate Jesus' birthday—and why it was such a **profound** day in the history of the world. It gets at the truth that what everyone needs most is a change at the core of who they are. And that change can happen—but it takes outside intervention of the supernatural kind. Usually before we're willing to change—our world needs rocked. We need to **clearly** understand the trajectory of where we're going.

-How many of you think that Scrooge would've changed if his nephew, Fred, had kept pounding on him? My experience with people tells me that when we bang on the outside of people's lives—nag, preach, shame—the walls don't go down—they get thicker.

-I think that's why, when God was sending his Son, he used supernatural messengers to prepare the way. The story of Jesus' birth is jammed with them!

1. For example, there's Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. The angel's first message always seems to be, "Don't be afraid!" Mainly because when a supernatural being shows up—and you're not expecting them—it scares you half to death. But, in this case, the message also **totally** turns her world upside down! It wasn't just snickers and finger-pointing from nosy neighbors—it could cost you your life. And yet the angel messenger said:

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" (Luke 1:30-33 NLT)

2. Apparently the angel took his time getting to Joseph, the guy Mary was engaged to. And he didn't quite believe her explanation, "God did it." I wouldn't either. As he was about to divorce her—which was what it took in that culture to quietly break the engagement, the messenger from God showed up and said,

"Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:20-21 NLT)

-And Joseph's response is amazing! He **immediately** does what he is asked to do. What if he had said, "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to think about that for a few weeks. My people will call your people."

-The next time the angel spoke to him—it was a warning to leave Bethlehem **immediately** to save his baby, Jesus', life. Herod, a jealous, suspicious old king who had killed **lots** of people to secure his throne had sent his troops to kills off this potential threat. They left immediately and moved to Egypt.

3. The overall message is that God was up to something powerful; profound. It would ultimately start with the soft cry of a baby—but it would shake everyone.

It would turn the value system of this world upside down. It would be Good News for most—but for the oppressors, the wicked—those who protected their power with blood—it was Bad News!

-That's what Mary said about her baby when she met Elizabeth—you know, the 60-something relative of hers who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Listen to a few phrases.

His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. (Luke 1:51-54 NLT)

-It sounds as if, for the first time in the history of the world, there will be **good news** for the broken, the humble, the hungry, the slaves—and **bad news** for those who've ignored them—made money off their misery!

4. And this change carried price tags for everyone involved. Simeon, another **human** messenger told Mary and Joseph when they brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated,

“This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.” (Luke 2:34-35 NLT)

-See, here's the deal. People with a lot of money and power and pride don't just usually just give it up on their own, thinking, “Wow! I could help a **lot** of people with this!” They usually have to have a defining moment.

-Right after Jesus was born, the sky was **filled** with angels! But only shepherds, the lowest of the low in that culture—could see them. Again, their message was plain:

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” (Luke 2:14 NLT)

-These angels started off by saying, ‘We've got **Good News for everyone!**’ God is coming **here!**

God was offering his Kingdom of Shalom—peace, wholeness, joy, plenty, compassion, grace, healing—all the goodness of God to all the people of the world. See, it was this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for **all** people! **Everyone would have a second chance—even those who didn't deserve them!**

6. The terms, however, are that we follow Jesus. That our hearts get changed, tenderized, softened toward God and softened toward others. Where people become our priority—like they are God's priority. That we do with our lives, with our time, with our resources what He asks us to do. If we will, the sky's the

limit—we can **truly** be free and find peace and have a transforming influence. Even if life has made old, hard, sour and mean--like Scrooge.

-As you look at Scrooge and what happened to him—just like his harshness and greed had affected everyone around him, his change of heart **also** affected everyone around him—starting with those who were closest. That’s where the world always begins to change.

-I always find it interesting how close Jesus stayed to where He was born. He never traveled more than 100 miles from his home town. As the Son of God, you’d have thought He would want to go to Rome—change Rome—then go to Alexandria—go miraculously set slaves free. Or go to the hungriest part of the world and make more bread and wine there—instead of at an outdoor meeting or a wedding.

-But He primarily changed the small group of people around him; then they changed the small group of people around them; then they changed the small group of people around them. And from there, starting with 120 people, the entire Roman Empire was reached in just over 300 years. The compassion, the goodness, the grace, the mercy of Jesus spread around the world.

-We often think to ourselves, “You know, if I could go to some inner city place, or to some area devastated by AIDS or dysentery—**some other place**—I could make a difference. I believe what Jesus wants most is to change our hearts toward the people **right in our path! Right where we live!** And **then** spread out from there! How about it—are you up for that?”

III. MESSENGERS OF TRUTH

A. Today, Jesus is **still** God’s message to a broken world. Jesus is God’s message to me...and to you. It’s a message of change. Like, not just **one** change—you know, a little cosmetic surgery on the exterior of our lives to make us more presentable. He challenged our values, how we use our time, how we used the gifts we have been given. It’s not a **negative** message intended to shame and humiliate us into trying harder. It’s a message of grace. Hope. That we can be the people we once **dreamed** we could be.

-He sees what we don’t see—can’t see. He sees people—but He sees them under the surface of appearance. Some are broken by life—filled with fear or anger. He sees people who have been oppressed by centuries of sadness and pain. He sees people who don’t have enough food or shelter...or love. He sees rich and poor, the successful and those fresh from failure.

He sees people who jog, eat well and lift weights—and the people too weak to lift their heads. His eyes are **always** on people. Always. The deal is—He wants **us** to see them, too.

-He also sees us—and how we sometimes get sucked into all the fake, lying messages that come at us from our culture that totally contradict everything God has said about life and how to live it. It **really** comes down to which messengers you’re going to believe. Let me give you an example of a few—and focus on one..

1. We are constantly bombarded with a **message of fear**. Fear of bad things happening to us or our kids. Fear of medical disaster. Fear of the future. Fear

of others who, if we get too close, will use us and take what we have. Think about the **constant** message that comes from the news; global warming, hurricanes, terrorism, crime, nuclear arms, financial threats—I mean, it just goes on and on and **on!**

-Throughout the whole Christmas story, the message you constantly hear from these Messengers of God is, “Don’t be **afraid!**” That’s the message of the Bible. 365 times. “Don’t be afraid—**fear not!**” And the reason? **God!** God is with you.”

2. Another message that constantly gets shoved into our lives is that appearance and success and intelligence and accomplishment are what **really** matter. And it’s a lie. The Bible says that God doesn’t even **look** at that stuff—that all that stuff fades away and dies. And then what God values is exposed. Our **hearts**.

3. There’s another twisted message our world sends—relentlessly. That fast is always better. I **like** fast! I’d like to think I had a car that could smoke everyone. I’d like a boat with 50 more horsepower on it—just **50 more!** And **you** like fast, too—don’t you?

-But **fast** consumes margin. And we **need** margin to be healthy, to think right—and to even enjoy Christmas. To finish life with a **soul that’s intact!**

4. There are a **lot** of other messages in our world system—let me mention one more that this story addresses. It’s the message of **more**. That having **more** is always better. More money. More stuff. More home. More toys. The implication is that having **more** will make us safe. That **more** is our protection against age, against an unsafe world, against medical crises, against unhappiness, against feelings of smallness and inferiority. In reality, **more** becomes god—because we think it will solve most of our problems—and therefore give us peace of mind.

-But the message of more, the **gospel of the bigger barn** is a lie. There’s not a thing wrong with money—but there **is** something terribly wrong with an attitude that makes life all about getting more of it. That believes all the ads, that believes Wall Street, that believes all the prophets of **MORE** who hawk their wares every second of every day—and who call you at meal-time to sell you doors and windows!

-The prophets of **more** get especially vocal at Christmas. Which is a shame because, as God’s message and messenger, that wasn’t **Jesus’** message. And it’s **His** birthday! How many of you believe that the message of **more** is true?

B. As I thought about the original message God was sending the world through Jesus, I thought, “We’ve got to take Christmas back! Would you like that? We’re getting stuffed into the mold of what our **culture** says Christ’s birth was about—not what Jesus said it was about!”

-Think about that for a minute. How many of you have a say in how your family celebrates **your** birthday? How many of you don’t—and frankly, you’re a little frosted about that! In our family, the birthday boy or girl gets to choose their favorite food, their favorite kind of cake—stuff like that.

-And my point is...since we're celebrating **Jesus'** birthday, don't you think we should, at the very least, be careful to honor what He taught and lived for?

1. I think Jesus would be okay with us nuking some of the myths that surround Christmas—and spoil His birthday party. One myth that needs to be euthanized is that **more** Christmas makes for a **better** Christmas. More cookies. More parties. More presents. More family over. More traveling. More shopping...

-I think taking Christmas **back** will mean creating some **margin**. More **margin** usually means less. Less parties, less noise, less busyness—fewer cookies. What makes Christmas **rock** is having the time to enjoy it—just not blow through it and drop exhausted on the other side! I would encourage you to just have the guts to say “no” to **more** Christmas stuff!

2. Just **one** more thing that I think would make Christmas a sustainable blessing for your family—and make someone else's Christmas beautiful. Think through and resist the way Christmas is marketed and commercialized. Just **think!** Ads tell us that children will be peaceful, contented and grateful if we give them the right stuff. How many of you believe that?

-Please don't get me wrong—I don't believe in or practice the Scrooge philosophy of giving gifts. I really like to give gifts. But I think it would be honoring to the One we celebrate to not get dragged into this monstrous gift-giving machine that Christmas has become. I have some suggestions:

- a. Jesus taught us to give gifts, not **exchange** them. You know the difference between **giving** and **exchanging** gifts, don't you? Jesus said, “Don't give to people who can repay you; give to those who **can't**.” Jesus offered his love to the unlikely—and sometimes the unlovely. And **always** to the needy. So, in His honor, let's take Christmas back and **do** that! It's **His** birthday, right?
- b. Another thought. Why not, in your gift giving, have your family adopt someone else—maybe another child? How many of you have kids? How many of you have kids that desperately need more toys and stuff—**lots** of it! Why not adopt a child through World Vision or the Christian Children's Fund or another organization—and involve your whole family in making their lives better!
-Allocate a chunk of your gift-giving money in that direction. Involve your kids—and celebrate **that!** And make your concern ongoing. Pray for them every night—that they'll be warm when it's cold outside. That they'll be dry when it's raining. That they'll have clean water to drink!
One of the gifts we decided to give one of the children we sponsor is an indoor bathroom so they don't have to use an outdoor latrine. Not very **sexy**, but **I** think they'll like it!
- c. Finally, be careful not to mortgage Easter to celebrate Christmas! Be really, **really** careful with consumer debt! I know it's Dec. 2, but try not to go in debt for Christmas. Less **may** be more. And do this with great

courage! Jesus followers have **always** bucked culture when it gets off course. We don't **have** to conform! We can be **free!** We can take Christmas back! It's okay! Go simple. Do simple things.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. It's very easy to watch a movie like **A Christmas Carol** and think, "Yeah, *I* know a few Scrooges—mean, stingy tight people who worship their money!" Or, "Yeah, *I* know a few people that are rude—and treat other people like dirt. Boy do **they** need a few messengers coming to **their** door to scare them half to death!"

-What's harder to see is our own hearts. Our **own** lives. You don't have to be a cold mean person to have an unchanged heart. Jesus—God's Messenger—God's Message—made it clear that it's not just the Scrooges of this world who need to change, who need a second chance. Everyone does. And that's why Jesus came.

-And it's not just about **doing good** and helping the poor. Even Herod, cruel, evil person that he was did that. We don't do good to earn brownie points with God. It **must** go deeper than that. It's not just a single night, a single change—it's ongoing. And it fundamentally changes the way we see God, the way we see others, and the way we see ourselves.

- B. And **that's** why Jesus came. We can't change ourselves. It's takes the power of Jesus—transforming us from the inside out. He doesn't just help us get our lives in order—He enlists us in His plan to set the whole world right—simply by **seeing** it through His eyes.

-How's your vision these days? Is your vision getting clearer—or more blurry? Is your heart getting warmer—more tender, or growing colder? Are you finding it **easier** to give your life away for Jesus' sake—or harder? God's messenger, Jesus, is right here. Right now.