

NAUGHTY OR NICE

Round the table discussion

Celia: I think that whole gift giving thing is so hard, there's so much pressure and expectation to get the right gifts, to make sure you haven't forgotten anybody, how much do you have to spend, what if Auntie Such and such gives a better gift than you, you know, there's so much pressure on this whole gift giving thing.

Do you struggle with giving gifts at Christmas? Who do I buy for, how much should I spend? Will they like what I give them? Hello, I'm Richard Fox from Messages of Hope. Stay with us as my guests Noel Due and Celia Fielke discuss Christmas gift giving. Where did the idea begin? Why do we still do it? And perhaps the most important question, have you been naughty or nice this year?

Richard: Have you ever heard the song Santa Claus is Comin' to Town?

Celia: Oh yeah. He's making a list, he's checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice.

Noel: Yes, and if you're not nice, you're not going to get a present.

Celia: I can still remember when I was little, my mum and dad must have made a big deal out of it because I can remember trying to weigh up had I been more naughty than I'd been nice and then if I try to be really nice now will that make up for it, and I can vividly remember that fear that was put into me.

Richard: Yes, I can remember seeing it in kids when I was at a Christmas party once and I got asked to be Santa Claus. So, there I was in this suit and sitting in this chair, thinking what do you say? What do you do? These boys and girls kept coming up with their different expectations and they were quite up front about saying, yes, I've been nice, I've been good, and I'd like the latest technological gadget or all sorts of things.

Celia: I think that whole gift giving thing is so hard because there's so much pressure and expectation to get the right gifts, to make sure you haven't forgotten anybody, and are they going to judge you for the gifts that you're giving? How much do you have to spend? What if Auntie Such and such gives a better gift than you? You know, there's so much pressure on this whole gift giving thing.

Noel: And it can all be quite manipulative too. You know, you might buy an expensive gift almost as a payoff to your conscience. Like this is a person I really can't stand or I haven't spent enough time with the kids, so I'll spend hundreds of dollars on them and that sort of pays off the fact that I'm actually an absent dad or that I hate them.

Celia: So, will you love me more if I give you a better gift?

Noel: Yeah, and we sort of almost get a sense of self-worth from it too. If I get a really good gift, then I must be worth something to this person.

Richard: Yeah, well I remember getting a bike when I was a little boy, and it makes your world. But I suppose the other side of things is when you don't get the gift that you really want.

Celia: I was a third child, I always had hand me down bikes, I never got the new bike.

Noel: And that just puts further pressure on doesn't it because then you feel like, well, I haven't been good enough, I didn't get what I wanted, so what do I have to do in order to get it right next time? And it sort of builds in this expectation that gift giving is a way of manipulating behaviour.

Celia: So why do we give gifts at Christmas? What's the whole background of that?

Noel: Well that depends on how far back you want to go. If you go back far enough, I'm talking a couple of hundred years BC you know, two and a half thousand years ago, gift giving was to mark the end of the winter solstice. You know, the longest night of winter. And you gave gifts because there was hope that spring would come and it would be bright and light would come into the world and you wouldn't be trapped in the darkness any more.

Celia: Ok, so you were giving gifts...

Noel: Yeah, but it was a bit like a lot of those ancient Greek and Roman religions, it was all fairly superstitious. Like, if you didn't give the gift then you got it in the neck and you had to make sure you give the right gift. So the naughty or nice thing, that's just not Santa Claus, that goes all the way back.

Richard: So how does it come into the Christian landscape of Christmas from that kind of ritual many years ago?

Noel: I think the early church thought that they could use this to celebrate the gift of Jesus. He is the light who came into the world to expel the darkness. Jesus probably wasn't born anywhere near December 25th, he was probably born in the middle of July but they used this to say that there's a greater gift, a different sort of gift and we don't have to chuck out the baby with the bathwater, we can use this festival, change its meaning and attach it to the gift of Jesus. And that's why we have gift giving at Christmas.

Richard: So that even came well before Santa Claus even came on the scene.

Noel: Santa is a 'Johnny come lately' into this game, I tell you.

Richard: And I suppose you can actually compare Santa and God a little bit, and Jesus. Often people might wrestle with what are the differences and similarities.

Celia: Do we have the naughty or nice lists for God? Do we have to, you know, be on our best behaviour?

Noel: I think we do have a naughty or nice list for God. It's just the way we think about God. He's the big judge in the sky and if we get it right he's happy and if we get it wrong, he's not.

Richard: I know, even my eldest daughter, when we went to the local shopping centre, her first sighting of Santa, she was petrified of Santa and I don't want her to see God in that light.

Celia: We're talking about giving gifts at Christmas, what I want to know is, how is the naughty and nice gift giving of Santa Claus different to the gift giving of God?

Noel: Probably in lots of ways. I mean some of the things that we were talking about before, if there's a sense of this gift comes because I earned it. That is very different from the giving of God to us because we haven't earned the gift of Jesus to us, for example. I mean, Richard, there's probably other ways that you can think of.

Richard: Well it doesn't matter if you're naughty or nice with God and a lot of times we're probably even more naughty than nice in God's eyes and yet he wants to give the gifts.

Celia: Well I suppose there's all those same expectations that we had with the pressures of trying to find and choose the right gift, there's none of that with God. We don't have to measure up.

Noel: Yeah, he doesn't give a gift with strings attached. He doesn't send his son into the world saying well, here he is but it's only if you do that. He give his son freely. It's not as though it's a gift where he's expecting anything in return. So, it's not a sense of we're doing anything to earn something from God, nor even in our giving to one another should it be seen as something that we're doing to earn favour from one another. It's actually just God's given this for us so we give out of the giving that he's given to us.

Celia: And it's probably something that shouldn't just happen at Christmas time.

Noel: No. That's true. That's true.

Richard: And he doesn't expect it back either, does he? So he doesn't expect the gift of himself, so in that Christmas time and he doesn't expect it back even if we're naughty or nice even after the fact, does he?

Noel: No, I suppose that's one of the things that we need to remember, that it's not a thing that he gives either. I remember seeing a fellow in an airport wearing a t-shirt and on the t-shirt was a picture of a bloke carrying the whole world in his arms with his little legs were scurrying along. The caption on the t-shirt was "everything is not enough". So giving things doesn't actually meet what we need. God doesn't give us things, he gives us himself. He gives us Jesus, who is God come to us. And it's rather strange isn't it and paradoxical that God should be born a baby and live in the manger and be carried on Mary's lap but God himself comes to us.

Celia: Yeah, and there's no expectations you know, with that relationship. It's not about whether you get the right gift or whether you've done the right things, or whatever.

Noel: Well, God doesn't give his gifts with strings attached. A lot of our giving is with strings attached, isn't it? So when God gives us the gift of himself in Jesus, he's only expecting finally, that we'll never get it right. And because we'll never get it right, that's why he gives us himself. He's not expecting us suddenly to become something that we're not.

Celia: Mmmm, that's his gift to us.

Noel: Mmmm, it's his gift.

Richard: What a wonderful gift. And I know we started with the song Santa Claus is Comin' to Town but really Christmas is a wonderful time to hear over again that Jesus actually has come into town and is here with us in this Christmas time.

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