



## Mixed Bag

Text: Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

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1. TA began his message with the truth that life hands each of us a “mixed bag.” Sometimes, this truth can be highlighted around the holidays. For many, the holidays are a time of joy. For others, the holidays can be full of pain for a variety of reasons. Or for others, it is a mixed bag of both. Share with the group what emotions the holidays bring to you.
2. Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-3. This text teaches that becoming a Christian doesn’t mean your “bag” will be better. Following Christ does not lead to “your best life now.” The wisdom gained from this passage should change our perspective (“Bad things still happen to Jesus followers”) and our expectations (“Our moments of disappointment reveal our unspoken expectations of God”).
  - a. When have you struggled with the truth that as Christ followers it doesn’t mean that life will be easier or more perfect? When is a time that you felt that God “dropped the ball?”
  - b. What are your current expectations of God?
  - c. What are the things you are focused on that you don’t have? When your expectations aren’t met, how do you typically react?
  - d. TA gave us advice to focus more on what we do have than what we don’t have. What are you thankful for? What has God given you that you do not deserve?
3. Solomon argues that the “same event happens to all” and TA agrees, saying, “Jesus never promises to shelter us from the brokenness of this world.” Read John 16:33.
  - a. What does Jesus promise his followers?
  - b. What does it mean to have the “peace” of Jesus amid hardship and suffering?
  - c. God might not always shelter you from pain, but he will always sustain you. What is the difference between sheltering and sustaining?
  - d. Talk about a time in your life in which God sustained you through a difficult season.
4. Read Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

- a. Take an honest assessment of your life and priorities. How would you rank how you tend to prioritize people, productivity, and possessions? Explain.
- b. Solomon exhorts us to invest in our relationships. Where do you need to invest in your church community or your marriage?
- c. What is something you can do this week?
- d. What has God wired you to do? What gifts and passions has he given you?
- e. How can you start to leverage more of your time and resources to these things?

Challenge: Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-12. If we are putting our hope in things “under the sun,” ultimately we will be disappointed. How can we reorient ourselves to keep our hope in the one “beyond the sun?”

Prayer: Loving Lord, thank You so much for holiday times and the wonder and excitement that they engender in all our hearts, and we just want to praise You for all the goodness and grace You generously pour out on us and all people, – and specially we thank You for the many blessings we gain from these important times of holiday fun and family reunion.

I remember the many feast days and times of rejoicing that You planned for Your people Israel and we bless You that we too have holiday days and holiday seasons, when our inner soul can be refreshed and rejuvenated.. in a relaxed atmosphere, when we are surrounded by precious friends and family members – and which provides us with such a special opportunities of close fellowship and communal fun.

At this holiday season we particularly remember those that are alone, or ill or going through times of stress or difficulty, those who have lost their jobs or a loved one, and pray that You would draw very close to each and every one. Let them know Your special peace in their heart and give to each one Your sufficient grace.

We thank You that You are a God that answers prayer and we give You all the praise and glory in Jesus name,

Amen

## STUDY DEEPER

Holiday Expectation Management - It's the most wonderful time of the year – or is it?

Thanksgiving is upon us, and Christmas just around the corner, and with this coupling come lots of expectations. For years I wrestled with how to navigate the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas with some semblance of sanity. Truth is, I still struggle with managing “the Holidays” well. Who will be home? What are the lingering family tensions? How can I make it special for friends who will walk through the front door? The questions, and stresses, go on and on.

I knew I was in big trouble one year when I fell prey to the jewelry commercials that convinced me my husband loved me only if he gave me diamonds. Really? Well, I bought it – obviously a small, neatly wrapped package with a sparkly red bow represented true love. When that package wasn't under the tree, and my Christmas Day was ruined, I knew I needed to take a closer look at my heart and try to find out what was going on.

Santa's Idol Workshop

And so, began my journey toward “Holiday Expectation Management.” What did I discover? What is God continuing to reveal to me each year?

First, there is joyful anticipation of the Holidays and excitement about the main things that you know are going to happen. Thanksgiving and Christmas will come, God willing. We will pause and give thanks to God for all he has done for us, and we will celebrate the birth of our Savior and be glad.

Then there are the expectations – those unspoken and sometimes misguided, deep beliefs that something could happen. This is where my heart went awry. I allowed wrong expectations to overshadow the real Joy of the season. I needed a serious heart adjustment. I needed to discern what was driving those wrong expectations. I needed to be honest with myself and others, but where to start?

Five Steps to Holiday Sanity

1. Holiday expectations can become holiday idols.

To begin with, I needed to be mindful that my expectations were becoming idols. I was replacing true thanksgiving to God, and all the mercies he has shown, with turkey and pumpkin pie. Celebrating the birth of Jesus, the real reason for Christmas, was being replaced with glittery trees and presents. Those things are good gifts, but they are not meant to take first place in my heart. I needed to remind myself of the simple truth in 1 John 5:21: “keep yourself from idols.”

2. Be honest about your holiday fears, weaknesses, and insecurities.

Communicating to others clearly that this can be a hard time of the year for me was the next step. Being honest and vulnerable wasn't easy, but opening up the dialogue with my husband, my friend, or my coworker proved to be an amazing blessing. I found often that by communicating my angst, I found someone who was more than willing to help me. What a gift! What a sweet provision from God – which I would have missed out had I not been honest.

3. Ask where your holiday expectations come from.

Being aware of who or what was defining my expectations was another hurdle to get over. Was it my husband? My children? Extended family? Guilt? The media? Fear of man? The still, small voice of the Holy Spirit continues to help us when those “expectations gone awry” begin to surface in this way.

4. Plan ahead for holiday health, maybe way ahead.

Being proactive – planning – was next. Knowing what I can and cannot do is one of the most helpful things I have discovered. Determining healthy boundaries before Thanksgiving and December is an ongoing practice at our house. One year, after a particularly bad holiday season, I wrote a letter to myself outlining what I would say “yes” to the following year. I gave the letter to a dear friend who held it for me until the following October; I received it in the mail on November 1. To this day, I am thankful for my godly friend who had the wisdom to suggest this plan of action.

5. God is the Hope of every holiday, however sweet or hard.

Finally, and most importantly, it is essential to remember that we have a loving Savior whose plan is perfect. Whether it includes a large gathering of friends and family at Thanksgiving, or a happy Christmas celebration with squeals of delight or perhaps even tears of deep sorrow, it is exactly what God planned. He doesn't make mistakes. It may be hard to weather the Holidays, and yet we are not without hope.

Ephesians 3:20 reminds us that he “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.” Knowing that, we can ask for healthy and happy expectations, anticipating that because God is sovereignly and lovingly directing all that happens, it may actually be “the most wonderful time of the year.”

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/holiday-expectation-management>