

Matthew 27:50-51a, Colossians 3:1-10

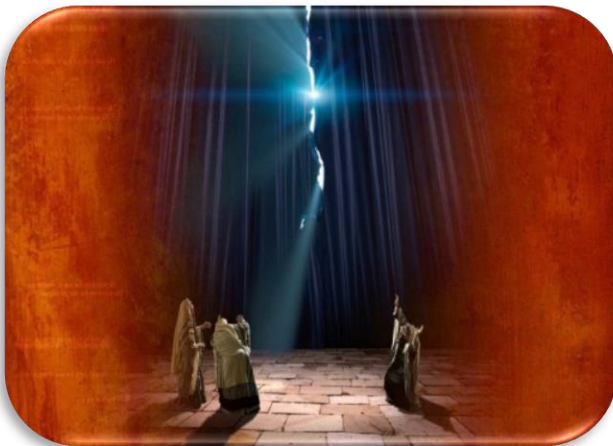
Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

Is it ok for believers to have a Christmas tree? With all its pretty lights, garland, tinsel, ornaments and presents doesn't the tree distract us from Jesus lying in a manger? As Christmas approaches, are we dreaming of Christ's birth some 2,000 years ago whom brought the world peace, joy and reconciliation with a holy God or are we busy dreaming about the material gifts we are about to receive that brings us happiness for a few hours, days or weeks? To keep from being caught up in the world's "commercial Christmas" should believers throw out their trees and refuse to buy any gifts? If this is the only way, we can focus on Christ on His birthday then the answer is YES this is exactly what we must do. A better approach would be to redeem Christmas by seeing the cross in the tree and gifts as an extension of our love for one another.

Jesus' Gift – Closeness to God

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.



Before we can truly see the cross in the tree, we must first understand the gift that we received upon Christ's death. The moment Jesus gave up His spirit we are told either by an earthquake¹ or more likely by the hand of God² the elaborate fabric of the sixty-foot-high curtain³ that separated the Holy of Holies from the Most Holy Place (Exodus 26:31-35; 40:21)⁴ was torn from top to bottom.⁵ Because Christ's atoning death permanently satisfied God's wrath on humanity's sin,⁶ the degrees of access or barriers to God were forever

removed (Hebrews 10:19-22).⁷ As the priests watched the veil torn in two⁸ by God as He left

¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 405.

² Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 865.

³ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 905.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 260.

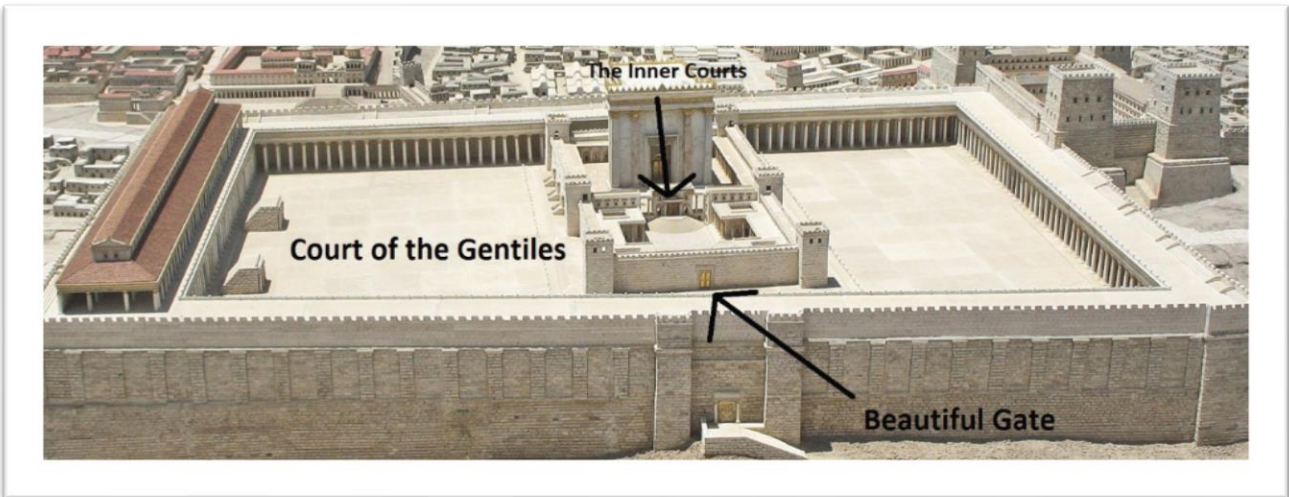
⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 421.

⁷ D. A. Carson, "The Gospels and Acts," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1996.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 624.

His temple⁹ would they have realized that hanging the Messiah on the tree would lead to judgement against the temple activity (Matthew 21:12-22)¹⁰ and the abolishment of the OT sacrificial system and high priesthood?¹¹ Would they have realized that “a new age of God’s dealings with His people had begun”¹² in which His Most Holy Place could be accessed by anyone who had faith in a risen Savior?¹³

Imagine for a moment that you were alive when Jesus was born and chose to serve the God of Israel. As you meditate (Psalms 1:2) and allow God’s word to guide your every step (Psalms 119:133) your love grows to the point that all you desire is to be nearer to His presence (Psalms



74:25-26). While you know that God is indivisibly present everywhere (Psalms 139), you still dream about getting a glimpse of His glory. So, you leave your home in Galilee and walk 80 miles to Jerusalem. As you approach the temple and see the crowds, the joy of drawing nearer to God is almost overwhelming! As you approach you notice tablets with writing on them both Greek and Latin warning any Gentile that proceeds to enter the forecourt of the sanctuary will be immediately put to death!¹⁴ So you ask the people around you if there might be some way that you could proceed and they state that only the Jews are allowed into the forecourt of the sanctuary, only priests and Levites are allowed to proceed into the court or sanctum and only the high priest is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year. With great sadness you stand in the outer court of the Gentiles and are left to dream of someday getting that glimpse of His presence!

In the context of the above story imagine what the tearing of the temple means for Christians today. The moment Jesus atoned for our sins separation between us and God ended.

⁹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1211.

¹⁰ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, 905.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” 580–581.

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 624.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 724.

¹⁴ Douglas R. Edwards, “Gentiles, Court of the,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 963.

No longer would we merely dream about being close to God, our bodies became the temple in which God chose to send His Spirit to dwell (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)! To have His Spirit “testify



with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16) erases any doubt concerning our eternal destination. Because of Christ’s atonement we are no longer needing to offer sacrifices (Hebrews 10:1-17) but instead through confession are forgiven and cleansed of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Since God replaced our heart of stone with that of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26), no longer are God’s commands a burden (1 John 5:2-5) but a love letter from He who enables us to be holy as He is holy (1

Peter 1:16). As His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and royal priests (1 Peter 2:9) God promises as we draw nearer to Him, He will draw nearer to us (James 4:8). No longer do we need to look for God from afar but though Christ can boldly approach the Father’s throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

Seeing the Cross in the Tree

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4, NIV



Does having God’s Spirit living inside of us mean that all believers experience a close relationship with His Son on His birthday? While it is true that nothing can “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38), our close relationship with God is severely hampered by continuing to focus on the things of this world. The believer’s union with Christ in death (verse 20), burial (verse 12a) and resurrection

(verse 12b)¹⁵ as symbolized in baptism,¹⁶ meant we died to sin¹⁷ of “the old self” and were raised to live the “values of the kingdom He has inaugurated.”¹⁸ To be close to Him “our basic inner attitude”¹⁹ must be one in which “every thought, aim, value, aspiration, and striving”²⁰ of His kingdom has precedence over all earthly allegiances.²¹ Becoming holy as God is holy is a process of bringing “Christian practice into line with Christian status.”²² Sanctification is to be continually worked on while on earth and finalized at the Parousia.²³ For this to occur we must be willing to let the Potter mold the clay of our lives back into His image. It is precisely when we ask Him to help us set our lives apart for God²⁴ by giving our allegiance to Jesus²⁵ that we draw nearer to God and Him to us!

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Colossians 3:5-10, NIV

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 249.

¹⁶ Arthur G. Patzia, [*Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 70.

¹⁷ Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*](#), 249.

¹⁸ Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*](#), 248.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ David E. Garland, [*Colossians and Philemon*](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 202.

²¹ Curtis Vaughan, “[Colossians](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 209.

²² David J. Williams, [*1 and 2 Thessalonians*](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 71.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Douglas J. Moo, [*The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*](#), 246.

To see the cross in the Christmas tree one must first remove all the sinful branches.

Sexual Immorality. While most Christians do not have sex outside the confines of the marriage, do not most sin by passionately thinking about someone else's body? With 90 % of all soap operas, 87 % of all movies, 73 % of all comedies, 71 % of all dramas and 53 % of all news magazines containing sexual content,²⁶ how can one say it is not a sin to indiscriminately watch television? Does not Scripture state that even looking at a person lustfully is committing adultery (Matthew 5:28)? If we want to see the cross in the tree, we must ask Jesus to cut the branches of sexual immorality out of our lives.



Anger. Since God demonstrated His anger at the children of Israel for making a golden calf (Exodus 32:10) and Jesus got angry at the people of the synagogue because they would not accept a miracle being done on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6), anger cannot be a sin. However, righteous anger and human anger are not the same thing. James tells us to rid ourselves of all human anger because rarely does it produce the righteousness that God desires (James 1:20). Human anger is often a volatile, internal emotion that leads to sins of either taking the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7) or hating a person made in the image of God (1 John 4:20). If we want to see the cross in the tree, we must ask Jesus to cut the branches of human anger out of our lives.



Slander. It is a sin to spread falsehoods about other people (Leviticus 19:16). While most Christians would not dream of telling outright lies, to gossip mean and hurtful things that might or might not be true about another person that is quite another matter! Scripture clearly tells us if we have a problem with another, we should either forbear one another (Ephesians 4:2-3) and if that is not possible then we should go one on one and work out our differences, not try and win a disagreement by spreading our position in the public arena (Matthew 18:15). If we want to see the cross in the tree this Christmas, then we must ask Jesus to cut out the branches of slander from our lives.



²⁶ Taken from the following website <http://www.jknirp.com/kaiser.htm>

Idolatry. To sum up his passage on holy living Paul referred to Exodus 20:3 and stated we are not to have any other gods except the God of Israel. Due to our greed and coveting it is easy for the world to “sell” us their version of Christmas which makes “material stuff” a god. Are we not told in Scripture to not covet what others have (Exodus 20:17) and to not store treasures on this earth where moth and rust destroy (Matthew 6:10)? It is not the expression of love for another through the purchase of gifts that is sinful but doing so at the expense of seeing the cross in the tree that is a sin! Every thought, aim, value, aspiration, and striving that takes us away from trying to become holy as He is holy is a sin and therefore must be cut out of our lives!



Conclusion

Is it ok for believers to have a Christmas tree with all its pretty lights, garland, tinsel and presents? The answer really depends on what “your” tree symbolizes. If the tree for you represents nothing more than greed and coveting the commercial things of this world then you don’t necessarily need to throw out the tree but need to have an attitude adjustment! In dying on the cross Jesus removed the barrier, sin, that kept us distant from God’s presence. In participating in His death and resurrection through the waters of baptism the old self died, and we were raised up to pledge allegiance to the kingdom that He inaugurated. To keep from getting caught up in commercialism, redeem the tree by asking God to remove all sexual immorality, anger, slander and overall idolatry from your life so that you might in turn see the cross in the tree. Remember God’s promise: as we draw nearer to Him, He will draw nearer to us! That is my prayer for you and me this Christmas.