

For more than twenty years, the television show Saturday Night Live has been known for its irreverent, sometimes outrageous humor. A recurring segment on Saturday Night Live is called "Deep Thoughts by Jack Handley." The deep thoughts consist of nothing more than touchy-feely psychobabble that sounds pretty good, but actually makes no sense. Here is a sample:

"To me, it's a good idea," says Jack Handley, "to always carry two sacks of something when you walk around. That way, if anybody says, 'Hey, can you give me a hand?' you can say 'Sorry, got these sacks.'"

Here's another: "If a kid asks where rain comes from, I think a cute thing to tell him is, 'God is crying.' And if he asks why God is crying, another cute thing to tell him is, 'Probably because of something you did.'"

That IS deep. "If a kid asks where rain comes from . . . tell him, 'God is crying.' And if he asks why God is crying . . . tell him, 'Probably because of something you did.'" Seriously, can you imagine a parent laying a guilt trip like that on a child? Of course you can!

A man named John Hakel says his three-year-old daughter looked at a calendar and asked him, "Daddy, how many BE GOOD days until Christmas?" (1) Why would a three-year-old be asking that? "How many BE GOOD days . . ." I wonder.

Supermodel Christie Brinkley has fond memories of her grandmother Mamie Cecil Bowling. Her grandmother often took care of Christie and her brother, Greg. But when the children became too much for her, Christie's grandmother had a unique way of taking a break. She would put little Christie and Greg on the kitchen floor, then put her false teeth down in front of them. Grandmother would warn them not to move, or the false teeth might bite them. Christie reports that she and her brother always stayed perfectly still until their grandmother came back and retrieved her teeth. (2)

We can appreciate that grandmother's concern. Taking care of kids is a demanding task. I suspect that every parent dreams of a harmless weapon that they can use to enforce discipline.

MY CONCERN IS WHEN WE USE RELIGION AS SUCH A WEAPON.

Our lesson from Mark's Gospel says, "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back--whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (NIV)

Advent is a season for watching. But watching for what? Our children are watching for Santa, but how about us adults? The biblical answer is that we are watching for Christ's return. How should we feel about that return? Apprehensive? Fearful? Should we be on our best behavior? You may have seen a bumper sticker that reads something like this: Jesus is coming back--and boy, is he angry! Some people would be very apprehensive if they thought Christ really was going to return.

It's like two boys who spent a delightful afternoon just outside of town. They gathered up all the nuts underneath the huge walnut tree at the edge of the town cemetery. When they were done, they sat down under the tree, out of sight of the road, to divide the walnuts. One boy kept chanting,

"One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me . . ." as they divided the nuts evenly. There were so many nuts, that a few fell out of the sack and rolled down the hill and ended up next to the cemetery fence. "We'll get those later," said the other boy.

A young girl was cycling down the road outside the cemetery. As she got nearer, she heard the voices, so she stopped and listened to the voice, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me . . ." She shuddered as she imagined some awful truth. She thought to herself, "God and Satan must be dividing the souls at the cemetery."

She cycled back to town as fast as she could and found an old man hobbling down the road, leaning heavily on his cane with each step. She said, "You've got to come with me. You won't believe what I heard. God and Satan are down at the cemetery dividing the souls."

The old man didn't believe her, "Shoo, you brat, can't you see I'm finding it hard to walk as it is." She kept pleading, and he eventually gave in and hobbled after her back to the cemetery. When they got to the fence, they stood quietly and heard, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me . . ."

The old man whispered, "Man alive, you've been tellin' me the truth, girl. Let's see if we can get closer and see them."

Shivering with fear, they got as close to the wall as they could and peered through the fence. Unfortunately, they still couldn't see a thing. The old man and the young girl clung to the fence as they heard the same words, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me . . ." Then, after another minute, they heard, "One for you, one for me, and one last one for you. Okay, that's all. Now," said the voice of the one doing the counting, "let's go get those nuts by the fence, and we'll be done."

The boys found a cane lying on the ground near the last few remaining walnuts. And, oh yes, the punch line . . . The old man got back to town five minutes before the girl did. (3)

Is that what you expect from Christ's return--that you and I had better be on our best behavior because Christ and the Devil are going to divide up souls on the basis of merit, and we don't want to come up short? Then you need to take a second look at the Gospel.

We titled this message: the difference between God and Santa. Here is that difference: According to what we tell our children, Santa loves us only when we are good, but the Gospel tells us that God loves us unconditionally. If you are being good because you're worried that one of these days Christ is going to return and turn you over to Satan, it's time for you to relax. The love of God for His children is an eternal love. It never ends. And it covers all the bases--including all of our sins. We do not need dread Satan's domain. Christ has paid it all.

BESIDES, AS EVERY GOOD PSYCHOLOGIST KNOWS, VIRTUE BASED ON FEAR OF PUNISHMENT WILL NOT LAST.

In fact, when virtue is fear-based, that which is forbidden somehow becomes more attractive. We want it more simply because we can't have it. The lure of the forbidden fruit! But virtue that is based on love will last forever.

Walter Wangerin, Jr., tells of the time that he deliberately disobeyed his father. Walter was throwing stones at the powerful floodlights that ringed the hockey rink at the college where his father was president. And always he missed. He was such a poor shot. Till one time, the tinkle of glass showered from one of those exploding six-thousand-watt light bulbs. Young Walter was stunned. He didn't know what to do. He made his friends swear they'd never tell. And then he went home with his secret festering in his heart.

He kept his secret, he says. Or rather, it kept him. It kept him from looking his father in the face. It kept him from the conversations around the meal table. It kept him even from wanting to hear his father call his name. They had a special name for him, between the two of them. He was Ah-vee, to his dad. But now, when his father came to his bedroom to say goodnight, the sound of that name was like blasphemy.

"Goodnight, Ah-vee!" his dad said. And young Walter turned his face to his pillow. And he said to his father, "Don't call me that!" And when his father asked him why not, he just broke down in sobs. It was the next day that he knew he had to do it. He had to come clean. He had to make his confession. He had to bare his soul, and take his punishment.

So he crept from their house to the large and imposing Administration Building on the campus of the college. The place reeked with power and authority. And so did the hallways that led to his father's office. The door itself was huge. And dark. And foreboding. And when he entered, his father was seated importantly behind a giant's desk.

"Well?" said his father,

"Y-e-s . . ." he said slowly, as he inched forward toward the desk. "Uh . . . I , I . . . Well, you know those 6000-watt light bulbs at the rink?" Walter said slowly. "Well, I guess I sort of broke one . . ." And then the story rolled out. And when it was finished, with Walter hanging his head next to the floor, his father slowly rose from his chair. And he stepped with dignity around the desk. And the world grew small and silent: only those two lived in it. And Walter knew the spanking that was coming. He knew he deserved it. He knew the world needed it, in order to be right once again. So he was totally unprepared for what happened next. His father knelt in front of him. And he took Walter in his arms. And he hugged him like a precious treasure. And he whispered the name. Over and over again he whispered the name: "Ah-vee, Ah-vee, Ah-vee."

"And in that moment," said Walter, "I saw the face of God." (4)

Do you think that unforgettable scene had anything to do with the kind of man Walter Wangerin became? Did his father beat him, humiliate him, threaten him with eternal fire? Of course not. His father loved him--and love will change a life. Love will take a corrupt person and turn him around. And that is what Christmas is about. "God so loved the world that God gave His Son . . ." God seeks to love us unto salvation. That's God's secret weapon. He will love us beyond any love which we can imagine. And what does God ask of us in return? Certainly right living. But many people live moral lives who have no concept that God loves them. Isaiah says that our righteousness is as filthy rags. It is not our righteousness that makes us acceptable to God. Only one thing does that--and that is God's love. No, right living is not what God asks from us.

WHAT GOD WANTS IS THAT WE PASS ON HIS LOVE TO OTHERS.

From 1979 to 1981, the Maze Prison in Belfast, Northern Ireland, was a hotbed of inmate protests. One of these, which was dubbed, "the dirty protest," was particularly distasteful. Prisoners refused to bathe, change their clothes, or use the bathroom facilities. The stench in the prison was so overwhelming that some guards fainted from it. No one from the outside world dared visit the prison.

On Christmas Eve 1980, a retired schoolteacher named Gladys Blackburne was wondering how she might spread the message of Christ in her town. She pondered Christ's humility in being born in a stable. At that moment, Gladys felt God calling her to visit a different kind of stable--the Maze Prison. When Gladys arrived at the prison, an official sent her to a young inmate named Chips. That night, Gladys Blackburne told Chips about the love of Jesus Christ. Today, as a free man, Chips leads a prison ministry. (5)

And that is the difference between Santa and God. Santa loves us when we are good. But Santa's love is not enough for God. "While we were yet sinners," writes St. Paul, "Christ died for us." Our righteousness is as filthy rags, says Isaiah. Clean living has its reward, but it will never make us right with God. Only one thing can do that and that is the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

So, let our children watch for Santa. You and I will look for the return of Christ. As we begin our Advent celebration we would do well to ponder the words of an unknown author titled

'Why Jesus Is Better Than Santa Clause.' Listen to these simple but memorable words:

- Santa lives at the North Pole . . . JESUS is everywhere.
- Santa comes but once a year . . . JESUS is an ever present help.
- Santa fills your stockings with goodies . . . JESUS supplies all your needs.
- Santa comes down your chimney uninvited . . . JESUS stands at your door and knocks, and then enters your heart.
- You have to wait in line to see Santa . . . JESUS is as close as the mention of His name.
- Santa doesn't know your name, all he can say is "Hi little boy or girl, what's your name?". . . JESUS knew our name before we did. Not only does He know our name, He knows our address too. He knows our history and future and He even knows how many hairs are on our heads.
- All Santa says "You better not cry." JESUS says "Cast all your cares on me for I care for you."
- Santa's little helpers make toys . . . JESUS makes new lives, mends wounded hearts, repairs broken homes and builds mansions.
- Santa may make you chuckle but . . . JESUS gives you joy that is your strength.
- While Santa puts gifts under your tree . . . JESUS became our gift and died ON the tree. It's

obvious there is really no comparison. We need to remember WHO Christmas is all about. We need to put Christ back in Christmas, Jesus is still the reason for the season. Yes, Jesus is better, he is even better than Santa Claus. (6) So let's watch joyfully for Christ.

1. Adam Christing, COMEDY COMES CLEAN (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996).
2. PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM GRANDMA , edited by Jennifer Gates Hayes. (New York: Regan Books, 1997), p. 14.
3. THEMАЗEMAN@aol.com cited on THE JEWISH HUMOR LIST.
4. From a sermon by Wayne Brouwer.
5. Colson, Charles. THE GOD OF STONES AND SPIDERS (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers), pp. 307-311.
6. MONDAY FODDER .

KING DUNCAN