

"LOVE A FAMILY MEMBER"
by Rom A. Pegram (12/17/17)

Do you know what the best part of Christmas is? Family—that's right! Do you know what the worst part of Christmas is? Family—that's right too! It'd be funny if weren't true. Am I right?

Unfortunately, Christmas is the time of year when all of the imperfections we bring to the family table are a bit difficult to digest. We know too much about each other to be as tolerant as we should be, don't we? Come to think of it, sometimes it's really *hard* to connect with our family in caring ways *because of* all we know about each other; we're not always as forgiving as we should be, are we?

At Christmastime though, we who are parents are given a very unique gift. Did you know that? We're given the chance to consider just how much our family means to us. We're offered a season of opportunity to make appropriate adjustments, if necessary. And that opportunity is a real gift ...

One movie that is fast becoming my favorite Christmas movie, based on a book by *Richard Paul Evans*, is called "The Christmas Box." It's a story is about a thirty-something businessman by the name of Richard. And, he's consumed with his career. Even though he has a wife and a young daughter, figuring out how to climb the *corporate* ladder is more important than helping his little girl, Jenna, climb the one attached to the slide at the playground. Well, as the story goes ... his wife—Keri—is tired of playing second fiddle. His daughter is too young to realize she doesn't have what many children her age do—a father who's there for her with time and attention. Into this scenario comes an elderly woman, Mrs. Mary Parkin, who changes their lives forever ... and visa versa.

A classified ad gets Keri's attention. The ad speaks of free lodging in a mansion in exchange for minimal maintenance and household chores. Richard reluctantly agrees to let Keri check into this opportunity. To make a long story short, they go to an interview as a family ... and the somewhat gruff Mrs. Parkin—a bit sickly and in her mid-70s—decides to accept them as housemates on a trial basis...

As the story unfolds, Mrs. Parkin lovingly challenges Richard's preoccupation with work. At the same time, Jenna (the daughter) begins to warm Mrs. Parkin's heart. She begins to soften ... and becomes much more approachable in time. But, as she does, one thing Mrs. Parkin begins to notice is ... how much the little girl is lacking a relationship with her daddy.

Richard begins to have a series of dreams that bother him. One night, he awakens from a deep sleep, hearing music. The haunting melody leads him to the attic where he discovers a wooden box designed to hold a family Bible. On it is engraved a nativity scene—*The Christmas Box!* Upon opening The Christmas Box, he discovers a stack of old letters once written by Mrs. Parkin to a daughter who'd died when she was about the same age as Jenna.

Suddenly it becomes clear to Richard why Mrs. Parkin is so insistent he not miss out on a daughter who's still very much alive. *The story ends with a bittersweet Christmas scene.* The widow loses her battle with an incurable disease, her dying words

ringing in Richard's ears: "Never forget that the first gift of Christmas was a child!" And her words did not fall on deaf ears. With the baby Jesus fresh on his mind, Richard reevaluates his options, considers the needs of his family, and makes the right choice...

...not unlike the father in our Bible story today. Yes, this scripture talks about the 'child' of that first Christmas, but before we get to the child, let's first meet the parents. Today, we're going to meet Jesus' earthly father... Listen (Matthew 1:18-25, NLT).

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "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. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: ²³ "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

It must have been difficult for him. Here's a guy who, I'm most sure, was no stranger to disappointment. Even though he could trace his lineage to Israel's most celebrated King David, he didn't live in the palace ... or even close to the palace! The fact was, he didn't even live in Jerusalem; he lived up in Nazareth. And, you know what people in the 1st Century had to say about that Galilean town! "Nothing good can come out of Nazareth!" It was a blue-collar community on the other side of the (donkey) tracks. But, Joseph was there—in spite of his pedigree—trying to make a difference. *And* like the career-focused father in "The Christmas Box," Joseph had a good job, envied by many, I'm sure. He was a skilled craftsman—had his own business. And like Richard, Joseph faced the temptation of putting his career and reputation ahead of those he loved. Joseph was in a tough spot, wasn't he? He had some serious decisions to make. *But*, of course, we all do at some point, don't we? And, there's something I've learned over the years about making major decisions I'd like to share with you. 'You want to know what it is? *There are two ways we can do it! WE CAN DO IT OUR WAY ... OR WE CAN DO IT GOD'S WAY!* First, in light of our story for today...

ALL OF US HAVE MAJOR DECISIONS TO MAKE IN LIFE... We have a choice and *one of the choices is to do it our way ...*

Do you know what Joseph's big mistake was in this story? *Joseph tried to make a major decision in his life without consulting God!* Again, folks, it's when we decide for ourselves, without bringing God in on our decisions, that we usually mess things up ... and Joseph was just about to!

Like so many of us, when it comes to major decisions in our lives that concern loved ones, Joseph had *the world's opinion* on his side. Put yourself in Joseph's sandals for a moment. Could you blame him for his initial reaction? His fiancé was 'found' to be with child. That's a nice way of saying 'he discovered that the woman he was about to marry was pregnant and he was pretty upset because the explanation Mary gave him was unbelievable!' Can you imagine the conversation?

“You mean to tell me you’ve been talking to an angel? Come on, Mary. How gullible do you think I am? And what the angel told you! I know you’re young, Mary, but trust me when I tell you that KIDS AREN’T MADE THAT WAY! Don’t play games with me, Mary. It’s painful enough to accept the fact that you’re pregnant with someone else’s baby. Don’t make it worse by trying to hide the truth from me!”

A pretty natural reaction, wouldn't you say? He didn't believe her. That's for sure. And I'm sure that most in *his* world wouldn't have blamed him...

Besides that, Joseph had the law on his side! Don't forget that! Jewish law allowed for a man to break off his betrothal and divorce his intended ... considering these circumstances. There was no doubt in his mind about whether to follow up on *that* option! After all, *he had a reputation to protect!* But, he loved her too much to expose her to public ridicule ... or stoning (a distinct possibility) ... so, he decided to divorce her quietly and walk away. Certainly that would be the best option for all involved!

Just like us, isn't it? We get into difficult situations with our families ... with societies opinion behind us, and too often we just make the decision on our own to walk away—to find a quiet way out of the situation... And the law is behind US too! It doesn't mind us handling difficult family situations on our own ... however we want to. So, why not? Well, we could do it our own way ... like Joseph started to...

Or—and here's the best option—we **could do it God's way**... But, what does this mean? It means remembering to bring God in on the major decisions we make that have to do with our families... Joseph finally did it God's way ... but why? Well, he had some help; God sent a messenger to guide him—to let him know about his upcoming *mistake*, which may have messed up their lives forever. Oh, that we would just listen to the voice of God in our lives! Folks, the truth is...

GOD CARES ABOUT THE MAJOR DECISIONS WE MAKE IN LIFE... He wants to lead us; did you know that? In John 10:27, Jesus says “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.” Folks, God wants to lead us ... but how often are we listening for God's voice—for God's input into our major decisions in life?

With this holiday season in mind, let me ask you a pointed question: *have you considered turning certain family members off during this Christmas season--you know,*

just not having anything to do with them? Are you looking for a way to walk away from a difficult situation? Or, are you willing to re-consider the decisions made *on your own* and give God a try? Like Richard in “The Christmas Box,” have the decisions we’ve made during this and past holiday seasons been good ones for those we love?

The truth is ... when we’re tempted to make the mistake—like Joseph did—of not bringing God in on our major life decisions—especially during the holidays, *we take a risk of messing up our future and others we love too!* Is that what you really want? Folks, God cares about the major decisions that we have to make in life ... and wants to lead us, if we’ll just listen. And, did you know this? God still sends ‘messengers’ to help us know which decisions will be best for all involved? His Spirit, if we’re tuned in, or maybe a close friend or family member. But, are we listening?

It’s like the time I chose to stay at work ... instead of attending my son Josh’s kindergarten Christmas program. The very first Christmas program my kids were a part of ... and I missed it. I wasn’t supposed to; that was the clincher. I had planned to be there, but then work got busier than normal. The problem was, everyone at work knew I needed to be at Josh’s Christmas program ... but, always the hero at that time, I had to stay and make sure *the job got done*. Unfortunately, I missed out on what was really important ... and I couldn’t ever get it back. And I’ll never forget that I got home just a couple minutes before the family did, and my son Josh looked up at me as he came through the front door and said, “It’s O.K. Dad, I know you’re busy.” Guess what? I was the Richard in the story—no better than he was at making the right choice, at the time...

Folks, remember, we who are parents—especially—are given a unique gift each and every Christmas. Do you remember what it was? We’re given the chance to consider just how much our family means to us; we’re offered an opportunity to make appropriate adjustments, if necessary. And that opportunity is really a gift ... and there’s still time this year (*like the countdown—shopping days—before Christmas*).

What are you going to remember about this morning’s message? I want you to remember just this: **IT’S OUR CHOICE WHAT WE DO WITH THOSE IN OUR (immediate) FAMILY ...** and how we make decisions concerning them...

- It was God’s choice how to react in a difficult situation; he chose love ... and sent us a baby (Jesus)...
- It was Joseph’s choice how to react in a difficult situation; he chose love ... and stuck it out with Mary...
- It was Richard’s choice how to react in a difficult situation; he finally chose love ... and his family priorities were changed forever...
- It’s been *my* choice to react to family priorities over the years ... and God (and Jane) finally helped me to ‘get it’ ... and I’ve chosen love...

How ‘bout you? How are your family decisions going this Christmas? Don’t be afraid to open up that Christmas box and let the contents fall into your lap. Put your family first. But, then, don’t close the door to how God may want to reconfigure your family (we

talked some about that last week, too). Ask God for his input. And don't forget to listen for his Messenger along the way...