

December 2005

Dearest Friends and Allies, Fellowship of the Heart,

The catalogs are already taking over the kitchen. I'm writing this a week before Thanksgiving, and already we must have three dozen Christmas catalogs piled on the counter (Stasi once used a catalog to buy something and now the word is out – they're arriving in truckloads). So, I thought I might offer a few tips on how to not only survive but also actually enjoy the coming holidays. Tested by personal experience.

1. Resist it. The madness, I mean. The rush to fit it all in – make cookies for the kids' school, bread for the neighbors, the special something for everyone you know. The desire – or is it *obligation* – to get to every party and event. If you try to meet the holidays on its terms, you will go under. It can't be done. As C.S. Lewis said, "It gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure. You have only to stay over Christmas with a family who seriously try and 'keep it' (in its commercial aspect) to see that the thing is a nightmare. Long before Dec 25th everyone is worn out - physically worn out by weeks of daily struggle in over-crowded shops, mentally worn out by the effort to remember all the right recipients and to think out suitable gifts for them. They are in no (shape) for merry-making; much less to take part in a religious act. They look far more as if there had been a long illness in the house."

Resist it. Don't try and "make it special" by doing everything right for everyone. Do not try and fit it all in. It can't be done. In fact, use the catalogs. Stay home and knock off your whole list in one night, and have it shipped to them. There – you're done.

2. You can't possibly please family. Not all of them. Not completely. Remember – family can be kryptonite. It's sad, but it's true. You know what I mean – you feel as though you've grown somewhat in the last year, that you are becoming more the person you want to be. Then you visit the family and boom – you are nine years old again. It's all gone, and what's back in its place is all the family weirdness. You see, our deepest convictions about ourselves, about life, and about God are handed to us by our family, when we are young. When things go wrong in a family, we as young children have no real means of sorting that out. We assume that somehow, it is our fault. And this carries on into adulthood. We feel that we are bound to rescue them. That somehow, through enough allegiance and good deeds we will atone for the family sins, bring redemption.

It can't be done.

Notice Jesus' take on family. Keep in mind now that he was *Jewish* – he came from one of the most family-centric cultures in the world, those family systems where it is simply assumed you will be there for Sunday dinner; there is no question, ever, where you will spend your holidays. Your life is subordinate to the family – its' needs, expectations, demands. Now, read the story in Matthew 12, about his family coming to interrupt a sermon he was giving to have a "family conference." They are at this moment *standing*, to add to the pressure, *outside*. Like any normal Jewish parents, they assume that Jesus will straight away defer to their claims. And, being Jews,

the congregation assumes and understands that at this point Jesus – like a good Jewish boy – will drop what he’s doing and go to them. Nope. He does not. ““Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” O my. This isn’t what any of us expected. “My true family are those who are in the family of God.” This is simply radical. Outlandish. He doesn’t run to meet his family in the street. It seems un-Christian. Except...it’s Jesus doing it. He is trying to re-frame our understanding of the most crucial human bonds. They are those which belong to the kingdom of God.

A simple piece of advice: Keep the cross between you and your family. Daily, especially if you will be with them. You don’t want all their warfare jumping on you. You want to be free to love them. Choose love – not obligation.

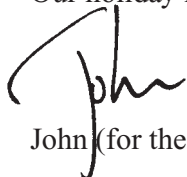
3. Let the longing bring you to God. Part of my deep personal ambivalence about Christmas is the longing that it awakens in me. There are moments, especially at night, when it all seems so beautiful. Especially Christmas Eve. And there are moments when relationships do seem to reach beyond the barrier, and connection is so good. We have time off just to enjoy it all. Life seems about to come together the way we always wanted it to. But it never really does. It can make you hate the desire it awakens. Or, you can let that desire take you more deeply to God, in whom we find our life. In the moment of longing, or disappointment, turn to him. Bring that part of your heart to Jesus.

4. Lavish on someone. This is one of the funnest parts of Christmas – to go over the top for someone you love, put something under the tree that just blows them away. Don’t you love it when someone does this for you? (Don’t you secretly hope they will every year?). I’m not suggesting you do it for everyone – that’s back to the craziness of Christmas thing. But do it for someone you love. You’ll have such fun planning it, and they will be so blown away. It’s the whole more blessed to give than receive thing.

Okay, I hope that’s helpful. I’m actually looking forward to the holidays this year, partly because I’m learning how to handle them.

One more thing. Would you pray about helping us at the end of the year? I rarely ask in my newsletters, because I’d rather give to you and let the Spirit move you to give as he would. But, too many people have responded with, “Do you have any needs? We can’t tell.” So, I’m being open and frank. Yes, we do. We need your support. We live by the financial help our friends send us. Personally, one of my greatest joys is to give to the work of Ransomed Heart, because I believe so deeply in it. If you feel the same, send us a gift. We’ll be very grateful!

Our holiday love to you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'John' written in a cursive, flowing style.

John (for the Ransomed Heart Team)