

# SERVANT LEADERS

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## Santa's Got It Backwards

by Sara Tusek

Santa Claus is an iconic symbol of Christmas. From his European beginnings, his image has spread around the world, bringing his particular interpretation of Christmas to nations of all religious beliefs.

The core of Santa's fame is his magical ability to grant wishes. Like the Wizard of Oz or Alladin's genie, Santa has both the ability and the willingness to give people what they ask for. The kindest way of explaining Santa's personality and actions is that he is generous, like God. The more cynical way of looking at Santa is that he caters to human greed and selfishness. In any case, though, what does Santa have to do with Christmas and Christians?

### God as the Great Giver of Gifts (and Santa as His surrogate)

#### Matthew 7:11

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

One of God's attributes is His generous nature. He gives life to each person, and He sustains life through His provision of a place to live (Earth), food, water, and so on. The most positive way to see Santa is that he is godlike in his giving. We ask, Santa gives, in the same way that God does. You could say that Santa's generosity is an allegory for God's generosity.

There is truth in this, but only on a simplistic level. We are utterly dependent on God and must accept His gifts in order to

live. But does our relationship to God rest solely on asking Him for our needs? Can we ask (as Oliver Twist did) for more? Or can we ask for less, trusting that God is already giving us exactly what we need?



*A Victorian Santa*

### We give our gifts to God (through Santa)

#### Matthew 2:11

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

A slightly more complicated view of Santa is that he represents our human desire to give to God. The Wise

Men of the Nativity story bring their finest gifts to the baby Jesus, because they know He is God. In the same way, people give gifts to each other to honor God, and the means of gift-giving is Santa.

This rather convoluted perspective has a flavor of nobility and unselfishness—we are not just pleasing ourselves by giving and receiving gifts, but instead we are acting out the nature of God, Who gives gifts, and we are at the same time giving to God. The problem with this view is that it sounds suspiciously like the same kind of rationalization that humans use every day to justify their behavior: "I did it for your own good" or "this hurts me more than it does you."

The idea that we can act like God has more than a little *hubris* (the destructive pride of Greek tragedy) in it. Using Santa as a means to act like God is either a rather noble, if misguided, concept, or is just plain silly.

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**"I want..."**

**Isaiah 1:23**

"Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them."

This statement from the prophet Isaiah sums up the scorn and skepticism that some associate with the concept and reality of Santa. It's quite easy to paint a picture of Santa in which he is the symbol of avarice, covetousness, and crass materialism. He is the perfect embodiment of rapacious capitalism.

By urging people to make lists of their wants, Santa is instilling into innocent minds the idea of forever being discontent with what one has. He is shaping children and inhabitants of poor cultures to believe that life is all about wanting and getting, rather than living and giving.

Santa's lure (his offer to give a person whatever he or she wants) is Faustian, in this interpretation. Faust got what he wanted, but sold his soul to the devil to pay for it. Eve, in the Garden of Eden, made the same commercial transaction: she sold her innocence for a dubious "knowledge" that brought evil and death into the world.

And Esau made the same poor bargain when he sold his inheritance for a bowl of lamb stew: [Genesis 25:32](#)

"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

Be careful what you ask for; you might get it and find it isn't what you think it is.



## What does Christ say about wanting more?

**Luke 12:15**

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

In this verse Jesus warns against the consequences of going after what we want, gathering possessions in a voracious, grasping way.

The dominant culture has the opposite message. People are instructed to want, to acquire, and to spend. Some economists gauge the depth of the current recession by the level of consumer spending. When people spend, the economy is said to be healthy and growing; when they don't spend, the economy is said to be sluggish and contracting.

Always wanting more is the basis of wealth, by this thinking. We are encour-

aged at every turn to desire, to buy, and to desire more. Have you ever tried to get through a day without buying anything? For the privileged of the planet, this is impossible. Even if you don't use your checkbook or credit card, your electric meter continues to turn and your carbon footprint continues to spread. You can't help but consume, and the consumption itself leads to an ever-increasing perception of life as a big game of wanting and getting.

## Santa's got it backwards

The life hidden in Christ, the life of a mature Christ-follower, is not about receiving gifts. The gifts we are given by God, although they are magnificent gifts indeed, are not the focus of living for God's purposes.

**John 14:27**

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Christians already have all the gifts they will ever need. It's simple foolishness to ask Santa for anything at all, as Santa has nothing to give that has any lasting value.

If Santa really wants to be part of the celebration of Christ's birth, he won't ask us what we want: he'll ask us what we can give. Since those who follow Christ have it all, it's downright selfish and sinful for us to ask for more!

So when we see Santa, we can tell him that our list is short this year: we are asking only that God use us for His glory.