

Merry Christmas! Despite the fact that much of the world has already put away their Christmas trees and turned off their Christmas lights, in the church it is still very much the Christmas season. We say Merry Christmas to each other today not just in memory of Christmas, recently past, but because Christmas is 12 days long. From sundown December 24 to sundown January 5. Yesterday was Christmas. Today is Christmas. Tomorrow is Christmas.

Americans have largely forgotten about this fact, but in other parts of the world they haven't. The British, for example, have a tradition that helps extend Christmas at least a day or two longer. Boxing Day is December 26, the day after Christmas. And it has some interesting customs surrounding it.

If you're not familiar with it, Boxing Day is another day to give gifts. But its not just any gifts. It's specifically gifts from employers to employees. At least that's what it is today. Formerly, it was a day for nobility to give gifts to their servants. And before that, for the rich of the community to give gifts to the poor.

That's actually where many scholars believe the name "Boxing Day" came from. The wealthy would gather for worship on Christmas Day and bring a special offering that they would drop into the alms box at the door of the cathedral. And the next day, the box would be opened and the money distributed to the poor. A tradition that fit well with the liturgical calendar, since December 26 is also St Stephen's Day. And St Stephen was a deacon who distributed food to the widows and orphans of Jerusalem.

It is a wonderful tradition. A way of extending the generosity of Christmas for another day into the Christmas season. A way for the rich to show compassion to the poor. A way for nobility and employers to show gratitude to their servants and employees. A way for all of society to reverse their roles a bit and, for one day, stand in another person's shoes.

Our Epistle Lesson for today talks about a similar reversal of roles that's connected to Christmas. A sort of divine Boxing Day for God and man. Except it's definitely not just one day a year.

To see it, we need to actually start one verse earlier than our reading. In Galatians 4:3, we read, "*We also.. were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.*"

What are these elementary principles that Paul is referring to? Well, if we look back at all of Galatians 3, we find that it's the Law. The Law which teaches us right and wrong. The Law which condemns us when we fail to do what is right. The Law which orders everything in this world, everything in our society, everything in our own minds.

It is the Law that tells us that stealing is wrong. And so it is the Law that tells us that we must pay for our goods. And it is the Law that tells us that if someone takes something from us, we have the right to have them punished and restitution made for their crime.

In short, the Law teaches us justice. And justice is the elementary principle of this world that Paul is discussing. Every society has a system of justice. Every culture has a code of right and wrong, and punishments for those who commit crimes.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, actually sees this elementary principle of law and justice as a proof for the existence of God. He says that even the most savage, pagan, even cannibal societies still have laws that say, "You don't kill and eat your neighbor." If even a society of cannibals knows that murder is wrong then, clearly, this law is written on our hearts from an external source.

It is not something mankind invented. It is something that God taught to us. It is an elementary principle of the world. Written into the fabric of the universe by our all powerful Father and Creator.

And it is an elementary principle that enslaves us, for a couple reasons. For one, because justice is something we're always seeking but never achieving. Look at our society. Look at our world. There is so much that is unjust.

Injustice in our laws. Injustice in how we apply our laws. Injustice in our attitudes. Injustice in how we treat our neighbor. And, occasionally, injustice in how those laws, attitudes, and treatment by our neighbors are applied to us. Humanity knows justice, but humanity doesn't do justice. And so we are perpetually enslaved by this never ending cycle of trying to make everyone else just, while we ourselves benefit from our injustice to others.

Moreover, this elementary principle of justice enslaves us for another reason: because it's the standard by which God judges us. And in this regard, we are definitely not just employees or servants. We are slaves.

Because, as Paul writes in chapter 3, no one is justified by works of the Law. No one gains righteousness by keeping God's commands. Keeping God's commands – all of God's commands, absolutely perfectly – is the bare minimum we must do to simply not be guilty of sinning.

You can keep every aspect of God's Law perfectly and you still won't have gained one iota of righteousness in His eyes. Because God's justice – the elementary principle of this world – demands that keeping His Law is exactly what you must always do. And so you get no reward from it.

Thus, you are a slave to it. A slave doesn't do what he's told because he gets paid for it. He does it because he must, or else be beaten or otherwise punished. We are slaves to God's justice. He is the master. We are the slaves. We do what we're told. And we get no reward for doing it well.

But, when the fullness of time had come, a divine Boxing Day occurred. God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law. The God who made the universe. The God who made us. The God who put into place the elementary principles of this world: His Law and His justice.

That same God was born under the Law. He became subject to the Law. Subject not just to his own perfect justice. But to the sinful systems of justice in this world. He became subject to unjust men who convicted him of crimes he didn't commit and sentenced him to a punishment he didn't deserve.

He was born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law. To redeem us. To rescue us from the unjust systems of this world. To rescue us from our own acts of injustice and the penalty of God's Law. To rescue us from being slaves, under God's wrath and judgement.

So that we might receive adoption as sons. The Son became a slave so that the slaves might become sons. The Son suffered the death we deserve so that we, disobedient slaves, might live a life we don't deserve. The Son was born of a woman so that by Baptism we might be born again of the Holy Spirit.

In a stable in Bethlehem, a divine Boxing Day occurred. The great master over all creation gave us a gift. A baby, born in a stable. A savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And now we, for all eternity, have the great treasure box of heaven opened to us. For though we were the poorest of poor, in debt for sins we had committed with no way of paying them back, he has paid our debt. He has given to us his righteousness.

We come to him today, not as slaves, but as sons, crying, “Abba! Father!” And receiving from him an inheritance we weren't owed, but receive with gratitude. An inheritance the same that Christ himself received. An inheritance of resurrection from the dead and life everlasting. An inheritance of ascension into heaven and glory in the presence of God. An inheritance of the kingdom of God.

Boxing Day is a tradition that America never adopted. Why would we? At the time when America was becoming its own country, we were getting rid of the very idea of noble titles. We were founded on the proposition that all men are created equal. And Boxing Day just didn't mesh with that concept.

All men are created equal. But what we must never forget is that the God who created us is not our equal. He is the king above all kings. The Lord above all lords.

And yet, on Christmas morning he became our equal, by being born in human flesh. And, even more stunning, on the cross, he became less than our equal. By innocently suffering death on our behalf.

Boxing Day may not mesh with American ideals. But it definitely meshes with divine ideals. For the God who created us has given us a gift. This gift of His Son. Amen.