# SIMPLICITY OF CHRISTMAS

DIRECTED ADVENT JOURNAL



SLD
USA EAST

THE SALVATION ARMY
EASTERN TERRITORIAL HEADQUARTERS
SPIRITUAL LIFE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
440 WEST NYACK RD
WEST NYACK, NY 10994



# SIMPLICITY OF CHRISTMAS



Christmas. The word can bring both great joy and a sense of heaviness at the same time. Joy because of what it represents – the birth of the Savior of the world – and heaviness because of all the self-imposed/ imposed other's expectations. Why is that? Perhaps there is a feeling of pressure from all the work involved in orchestrating the family traditions and celebrations. Some are worried about holiday bills, and others are worried about how to survive Christmas after a recent loss, such as a divorce, death in the family, or layoff from a job. Some are troubled by being childless or single or estranged from family and wonder how they can piece together a memorable celebration.

Every year we commit that this year will be different. We will simplify how we celebrate, but then we get swept up in the minutia of holiday preparations. Once the holiday ball gets rolling, it is hard to stop it. Then, when all is said and done and the season is over, we are exhausted and disappointed. Christmas was again the blur of shopping, wrapping, events, parties, and some crushed expectations. So, consider being proactive. Think about committing yourself and others to make this holy season richer in meaning and purpose.



DECEMBER 25TH

*"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish."* John 1:14 (MSG)

*"God presents himself to us little by little. The whole story of salvation is the story of God who comes. The hour of his coming is the Incarnation. The Incarnation brings the world his presence. It is a presence so complete that it overshadows every presence before it. The invisible, intangible God made himself visible and tangible in Christ."*
The God Who Comes by Carlo Carretto

For your reflection

- How has the invisible, intangible God made himself known to you during this Advent season?

Prayr for Christmas Day
Lord, you have chosen the lowly dwelling place of my heart. Come afresh and anew on this day, I pray. Amen.

## DECEMBER 24TH

*"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:...a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak..."* Ecclesiastes 3:1&7 (NIV)

One of the greatest gifts you can give someone is the ministry of presence. Never underestimate the value of your listening ear. "People don't want to be fixed; they want to be heard." Steve Macchia

For your reflection

- Is someone who needs the ministry of presence in your life right now? Who might that be? Reach out to them, let them know you are thinking of them, and then listen.

Prayer for the day

Lord, grant me the ability to listen with your ears and show compassion as you have shown me. Amen.



## WHERE TO BEGIN

It is one thing to say you want to simplify how you will commemorate the holiday. But, first, you need to start with a few simple but meaningful statements that speak to the true spirit of Christmas. What matters most to you and yours? And to what are you committing?

The following is a Bible-based plan for December leading up to Christmas Day. In this plan are some broad-swept points that you will have the opportunity to ponder as part of your daily quiet time with the Lord during these days of Advent. So may His Word become embedded within your soul that those concerns, thoughts, and activities choking the joy out of your worship and celebration of Jesus rise to the top. During this time, the Lord will help you focus on how to celebrate the Savior's birth in a way that is unique for you. God will also help you open the doors to communicate this pledge with the significant people in your life.

Consider committing to one or more of the following steps to allow the true simplicity of Christmas to become a top priority and bring new energy and focus. God bless you on your journey to a more humble, modest, uncomplicated celebration of the birth of the Savior of the world.

## STEPS TO A SIMPLER CHRISTMAS

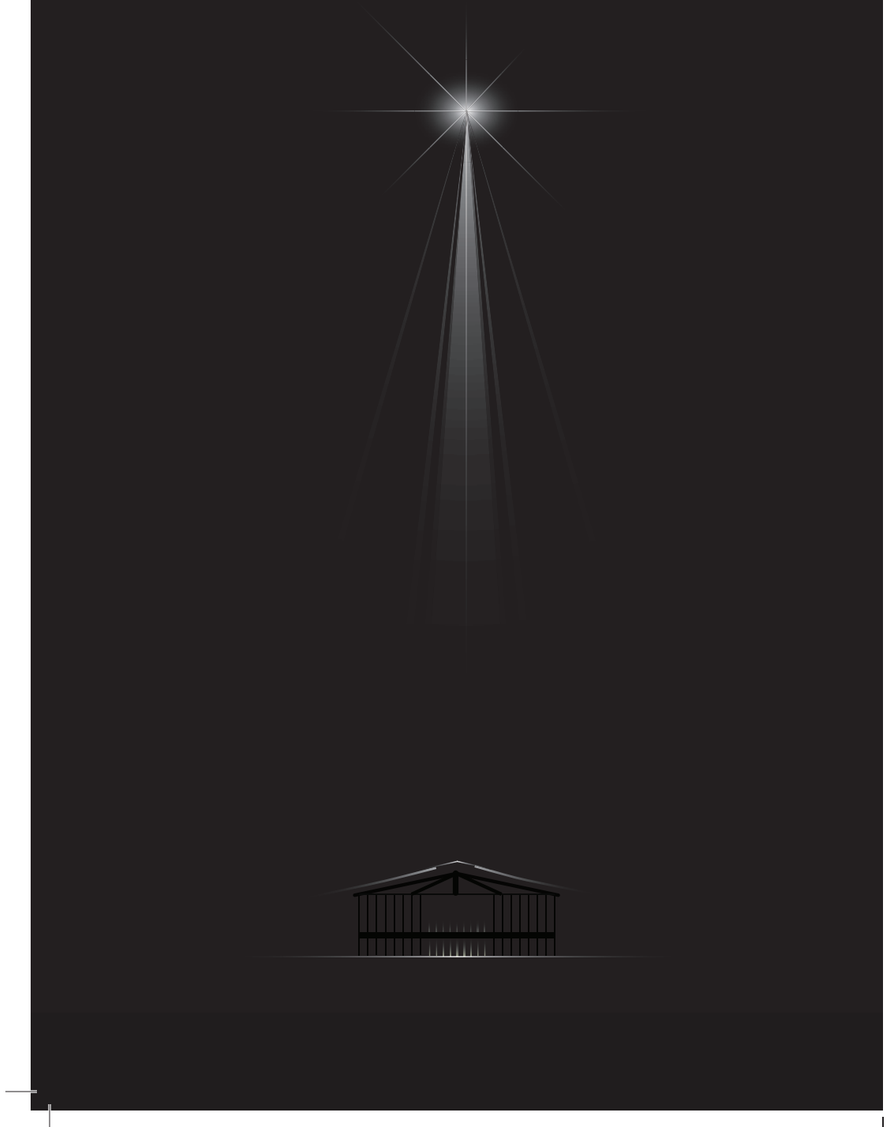
Rededicate myself to spiritual growth

Expressing my deepest values through my holiday activities

Sharing my love in more direct ways than gifts

Giving to those who truly need my gifts

Be a peacemaker within my sphere of influence





*"Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out."* 1 Thessalonians 5:15 (MSG)

We all have "triggers," such as memories, objects, or people that spark intense negative emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger. Holidays can be triggers for you or those around you.

The holiday may be difficult because it reminds us of difficult memories such as a death in the family, divorce, or simply magnifying a person being alone. Being attentive to one another's triggers and being a source of encouragement and compassion may be just what someone needs during the holidays.

For your reflection

- Is there someone the Lord has brought to your attention who has suffered a loss or is alone during the holidays that you can encourage? What might you do to give encouragement and compassion?

Prayer for the day

Gracious Lord, open my eyes, ears, heart, and my very life to be a healing reminder of your love for someone during this season. Amen.

*"Blessed [spiritually calm with life-joy in God's favor] are the makers and maintainers of peace, for they will [express His character and] be called the sons of God."* Matthew 5:9

Some holiday advertisements create a peaceful scene of a family enjoying a meal that conjures a deep sense of belonging and contentment. Yet, as wonderful a scene as these commercials depict, expectations may be dashed because preconceived ideas are not met. This can cause stress levels to increase.

How do you create a calm atmosphere at such gatherings? It starts with the work you do within yourself. Author John Groberg says, "Sometimes God calms the storm, and sometimes God calms the child in the midst of the storm."

For your reflection

- Is there a holiday celebration coming up that is causing you some anxiety? Be proactive and spend time in God's presence, drawing from him spiritual calmness. Journal your thoughts.

Prayer for the day

Heavenly Father, bring peace into my soul that passes all worldly understanding and make me a light for others to see Your strength. Amen.





*"I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever he wants..."* Luke 1:38 (TLB)

Mary spoke the phrase above in response to the angel Gabriel's announcement that she was to become the mother of the Messiah. These words became a part of the Christmas account, and perhaps they lost some significance to what this young woman is responding to. Yes, Mary was chosen by the Almighty to be an instrument through which the Savior of the world would come, but her no-nonsense pledge is something to really ponder.

Over the next few days, you will be asked to consider the impact of this pledge by breaking it down word by word, phrase by phrase. What would happen if you were to utter these words? What impact would it make on how you celebrate this holy season?

For your reflection

- Consider the last time you made a pledge/promise. What were you committing to? What did you learn about yourself from the promise you made?

Prayer for the day

Lord, my desire is to be your servant. I realize I do not understand all that entails. Show me the way to serve you that gives you the honor that is due you. Amen.

*"I am the Lord's..."* Luke 1:38 (TLB)

These first few words speak of surrender as we look at this declaration of Mary's. Not a surrender given up forcibly, but a thoughtful willingness to be given over to the Almighty's plan without reservation. This does not mean there wasn't apprehension, but there was with Gabriel's announcement room for question and wonder. Yet, through it all, Mary freely trusted God and accepted her role.

Perhaps for Mary, there was an element of fear of the unknown. Not everything the Lord may ask of any of us will be in our comfort zone. Fear may abound. That does not mean you have failed him due to a sense of fear. God honors you, especially when you are willing to do it, afraid.

The challenge to celebrating Christmas more simplistically may be fear of change; what will others think? Will streamlining holiday observances be misunderstood by others?

For your reflection

- What comes to mind when you consider the word "surrender"?

- Consider a time when you surrendered to something, generating a positive result.





*"And yet I can't forget the days of old, the days I've heard so much about; I fix my mind on all You have done; I ponder the work of Your hands..."* Psalm 143:5 (VOICE)

Holidays can be a bit of a minefield regarding family relationships. It can be polarizing when this is supposed to be a joyful family bonding time. In addition, family expectations can cause stress and disappointment when keeping family traditions alive.

How do you balance family-honored tradition and unavoidable changes in your family structure and location?

For your reflection

- Consider a cherished Christmas tradition. Within reason, can this tradition be replicated this year? If not, is there something that can be substituted to give honor to family members and meaning to your Christmas celebrations?

Prayer for today

Heavenly Father, thank you for the Christmases past. May the way I observe Christmas this year with family and friends bring us closer to you and those with whom I celebrate. Amen.




- Is the Lord asking you to surrender one tradition that no longer brings life to your worship of the Lord this holiday season?

Prayer for the day

Lord, help me remember that anything you ask me to surrender allows me to remove that which drains my fervor for you. Surrender gives me more room for your love and mercy. Thank you for this pruning. Amen.

DECEMBER 3RD

*"I am the Lord's servant..."*

One way to describe being a servant of the Lord is to be humble before him and, therefore, ready to act as he moves and inspires. If we pursue the attitude of humility before the Lord, he will help us put priorities into place. Psalm 16:6 says, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance." We will see the divine order of opportunities to serve in humility to God's sovereignty.

Humility is not some self-deprecating attitude that causes us to drain ourselves of every ounce of our identity and blindly follow. That kind of service will eventually come from a dry place and won't honor God. Honest humility is a genuine desire to put others first in a balanced way that serves them and brings life to our souls. "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less." C.S. Lewis

For your reflection

- Ask the Lord what one way you can serve him this Christmas. His call to service will bring about the better good for another and, in turn, will be life-giving to you. What is the act of humble service he has brought to your mind? Be specific.

Prayer for the day

Lord, shape my priorities this day, so I may bring you glory, serve others humbly, and bring vitality to my soul. You alone can make this happen. Amen.



DECEMBER 20TH

*"The former way of doing things, a system of commandments that never worked out the way it was supposed to, was set aside; the law brought nothing to maturity. Another way—Jesus!—a way that does work, that brings us right into the presence of God, is put in its place."* Hebrews 7:15 (MSG)

Earlier in the month, we examined how to express our deepest values through your holiday activities. So maybe it's time to be reminded of the traditions that need to be fine-tuned.

The scripture for today speaks of an old way – the law - that was helpful in its time, but a new way came – Jesus – that brought a fine-tuned presence of the Lord. Possibly you need to revisit how you have decided to simplify your celebrating, gift-giving, and other areas of Christmas.

For your reflection

- Consider if any changes need to be revisited or solidified. Take some time looking over past written reflections and rededicate your desire for simplicity this holiday season.

Prayer for the day

Almighty God, you came to us in the birth of Jesus Christ. Be born in me anew today by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

*"And when you draw close to God, God will draw close to you... let your hearts be filled with God alone to make them pure and true to him."* James 4:8 (TLB)

As the days before Christmas become less, there may be a sense of stress on your to-do list. The purpose of this booklet is to help keep focused on the steps to simplicity in our traditions and celebrations.

Don't let the urgent overtake the important.

### For your reflection

- Take time to separate your simplified "to-do" list from your past "must-do" list. What have you (re-)discovered?

| To-do list | Must-do list |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

### Prayer for the day

Lord, help me discern what is worldly urgency and what is godly importance. Show me when the world is trying to squeeze me into its own mold (Romans 12:1-2). Amen.





*"...I am willing..."*

What are we saying when we say we are "willing"? We are ready to do whatever is required. Depending on the circumstances, that can be a tall order because you cannot always predict the cost. Certainly, that was so for Mary when her role as mother of Jesus was revealed. She was given space to ask her questions. When God reaches out to us, he always provides space. The willingness may still be timidity, but God hovers and walks with us into the unknown. He is as close as the whisper of his name. Gabriel brought reassurance by saying, *"the power of the Highest [will] hover over you"* (Luke 1:35 MSG).

### For your reflection

- Yesterday you were asked to consider a humble act of service for another this Advent season. Take some time to count the cost by journaling what may be required of you.

Consider all the aspects of this act of service. Sit with the questions. God always gives space for asking. There may still be some unanswered questions but remember timidity does not disqualify you for what you are called to do.

### Prayer for the day

Lord, stir up within me an eager willingness to be an instrument for your glory. Amen.

*"...whatever he wants."*

The Christmas story is a story of obedience. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and sometime later the Wisemen were all obedient and became partners in the proclamation of the birth of our Savior. Whether in words or actions, they lived out the phrase, "whatever he wants."

Are you at a point in your relationship with God where you can say, "Whatever he wants, I want."? That means his and your desires are in sync; therefore, you delight in doing and living out his will. "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires." Psalm 37:4 (NLT)

When our and God's hearts are in divine harmony, "whatever he wants" brings a deep-seated joy.

For your reflection

- What is your "whatever" that needs to be dedicated or rededicated to the Lord? Take your time to name it in his presence.

- How do you plan to move forward with what has been revealed to you? Journal it.

Prayer for the day

Heavenly Father, you provided for my every need when you sent Jesus to earth to be my Savior and Lord. May I always respond with, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever he wants." Amen.





*"And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for all God gives to his Son Jesus is now ours too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering."* Romans 8:17 (TLB)

We give to others because we belong to God, but our giving will be greatly inspired when we realize all we have received as his children.

God's grace toward us is abundant – excessively so. If we were to stop and take stock of our blessings, we would become overwhelmed with the Lord's generosity. Keep in mind that abundant blessings imply great responsibility (Luke 12:48)

For your reflection

- You are a precious child of God! From that abundance, you can give to others in need. Consider the "who" and "why" of those who truly need a gift this holiday. Thank God that you can give out of that abundance. Journal your thoughts.

DECEMBER 17TH

# EXPRESSING MY DEEPEST VALUES THROUGH MY HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES



*"...you are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people who belong to God. You were chosen to tell about the excellent qualities of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* 1 Peter 2:9 (GW)

Yesterday we learned about who truly needs our gifts, but we also need to consider why we are to do so. We belong to God. We have been bought with the highest price – Jesus' precious blood (1 Corinthians 6:19). When we recognize this, we then are on a journey to conform to the image of Christ for the sake of others.

## For your reflection

- Yesterday you decided who truly needs a gift from you. You have also considered how that will be done. Now, sit in God's presence and reflect on why you feel called to follow through with this task. Journal your response

## Prayer for the day

Lord, every good and pure motivation comes from you. You are the Creator of motivation and determination. Stir within me good works for the sake of others. Amen.

*"Only the Lord knows! He searches all hearts and examines deepest motives so he can give to each person his right reward, according to his deeds—how he has lived."* Jeremiah 17:10 (TLB)

We juggle many responsibilities. At no time in our calendar is this truer than during the Christmas season. We are people who need to connect with others, and we can do that in a myriad of ways through a variety of holiday gatherings. There are parties, family get-togethers, concerts, and worship services unique to the holiday.

Our purest motivation is to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world, but sometimes our motives get muddled, and our inability to say "no." We then find ourselves running to keep up with all the commitments we have made.

It is important to understand what you value and seek a way to live it out. This will take being silent and listening to the Voice within that truly speaks into how you can best celebrate the coming of the Christ Child. Remember, there are many other voices. Ask God to help you discern your choice of holiday activities that best represent your deepest values.

For your reflection

- List holiday celebrations to which you are expecting or expected to attend.





*"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever; their horn will be lifted high in honor."* Psalm 112:9 (NIV)

As you have made (or will make) your Christmas gift list, don't forget those who are at risk and may need assistance during the holiday. It may include those unable to provide for themselves or their families. Many can barely make ends meet, and Christmas is just an added layer of going without.

Certainly, there are many ways you can help others who genuinely need a gift this holiday. The Salvation Army offers opportunities such as standing at a kettle for a few hours, adopting a family, providing a gift through the Angel Tree Program, or delivering gifts to nursing homes and hospitals through the Community Care Program.
Just as some are a "must give" on your Christmas list, do not forget those who truly need a gift to meet their needs and help them feel valued.

For your reflection

- What way (mentioned above or in another way) is the best vehicle through which you can help someone in need this Christmas?

Prayer for the day

Almighty God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, open my eyes, ears, and heart to the needs of those around me today. Show me how to meet needs in your name. Amen




- What gatherings most speak of your deepest values?

Prayer for the day

Lord, I trust you with all my heart. May all my ways acknowledge you. Give me a discerning heart. Amen.

DECEMBER 7TH

*"Someone may say, 'I'm allowed to do anything,' but not everything is helpful. 'I'm allowed to do anything,' but not everything encourages growth."* 1 Corinthians 10:23 (GW)

We all make choices. Some are automatic, such as your daily hygiene routine, and some are more intentional, such as words we speak. As you whisk your way through the holiday season, carefully choose the activities that will be more intentional and less automatic.

Just because you have received an invitation or been asked to take on a holiday responsibility does not mean you have no choice in your response. Remember, you can say "yes" or "no."

For your reflection

- Spend time in God's presence with your December calendar. Where do you feel he is leading you to respond "yes," and where is he leading you to respond "no"? Are there changes that need to be made?

Prayer for the day

Lord, give me a deeper depth of your divine insight through your abounding love. Amen.



DECEMBER 15TH

*"Further, my brothers and sisters, be joyful because you belong to the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write about some important matters to you again. If you know about them, you will have a safe path to follow."* Philippians 3:1 (NIRV)

Old-fashioned "snail mail" letter writing has been all but lost. There is nothing wrong with 140 characters or less messages. But, there is something deeply personal and powerful about a letter that cannot be conveyed in short bursts of communication.

Is that something you would like to consider as a gift this holiday? Maybe something written to a child, grandchild, or friend. What is so valuable about a letter is that it can be read and reread. Your letter may become a precious memento that can be saved and cherished throughout the recipient's lifetime.

For your reflection

- Are there words you have wanted to express to someone that motivates you to put pen to paper? Who might that be?

Prayer for the day

Lord, your written word contains precious messages of love, grace, and mercy. Help me to share those sentiments with someone. Amen

### 4th Love Language – Physical Touch

*"For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands."* 2 Timothy 1:6

We live in an atmosphere of respect for everyone's space, and rightly so, but maybe it's time to consider the importance of appropriate touch.

The "laying on of hands" in the Bible was an important means of sharing God's approval and value of another. It was a passing of God's blessing as one laid hands on another.

Consent must always be sought, and appropriate touch is important to consider. Don't underestimate the gift of an encouraging hug, a hand on the shoulder, or a pat on the back. Never undervalue the importance of human touch.

### For your reflection

- Spend time with God asking who may need the gift of meaningful touch this holiday season. Then, consider how you will seek consent and bless someone with meaningful touch in the name of Jesus.

### Prayer for today

God, your love is never-failing. Help me to never minimize the ministry of reaching out and touching another in your name with your compassion. Amen.





*"...he [Joseph] fell into a dream and saw an angel standing beside him. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "don't hesitate to take Mary as your wife... When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel commanded..."* Matthew 1:20 & 24 (TLB)

Nobody said it would be easy. Any time you decide to go a different direction, even the slightest detour may conjure up misunderstanding or difficulty. However, that does not mean it is not of God.

Certainly, this was true for Joseph. Being betrothed to a woman with child, which was not even his own, was means of a public divorce, but God had a different path in mind for Joseph, and nobody said it would be easy. Nevertheless, Joseph "did what the angel commanded," and the generations to come have been the benefactors.

Is there something you are hesitant to do or stop doing in your celebration of Christmas ("because we've always done it that way")? Is it possible that whatever the Lord is leading you to tweak may be valuable to future generations?

### For your reflection

- Yesterday you zeroed in on what you might keep on your Christmas calendar and what might need to be eliminated. Next, consider your plan for reducing the activity that has been recalled.

### Prayer for the day

Lord, I want to sit in your presence. Show me an area where I need to simplify my activity so that I may worship you with more intentionality. Amen.

*"The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance."* Psalm 16:6 (NIV)

Yesterday we discussed the idea that even though you feel a leading by the Lord to make a change, it does not mean all will be smooth sailing. That is about your outer life and those who might misunderstand when you pull back to live a more simplified life. Yet, when it's unmistakably the leading of the Lord, the inner peace brings a perfect fit.

Often, when we release from one responsibility, it opens an opportunity for space to be reflective, stay in the moment, and feel the Lord's presence. What a wonderful time of year to do just that. Consider the coming of the Christ Child and the richness his coming has brought to your life.

For your reflection

- Has your December calendar been simplified to give you a little more time for reflection? What is God leading you to do with him during that time?

Prayer for the day

Lord, as I do with you, you long for time alone with me. So help me, this day, to do more than simply think about being with you but stop in your presence. Amen.





3rd Love Language - Acts of service

*"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."* 1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)

Never underestimate your service to another as a gift. Not only a gift from you but from God as he has gifted everyone to serve in your unique way. Is there a task you can do in organizing, painting, writing, cooking, child care, or cleaning? Use your imagination.

Maybe you would consider creating a "gift card." State the loving act of service you would like to give someone, especially someone elderly, alone, or physically challenged.

For your reflection

- Is there someone with a task needing to be done that you can gift through service? Who is it? What is the act of service?

Prayer for the day

Lord Jesus Christ, you have shown me what it means to be a servant. Give me the grace and strength to follow in your footsteps. Amen.

*"O Lord, your name endures forever. O Lord, you will be remembered throughout every generation."* Psalm 135:13 (GW)

Have you ever considered how you celebrate Christmas today could possibly set a tradition and establish a legacy? The succeeding generation may follow your lead.

For your reflection

- How do you want to express your deepest values through your holiday activities?





2nd Love Language - Words of affirmation

*"So, speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind."* 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (MSG)

For some people, words of affirmation are like water on parched soil. Yet, words of encouragement and kindness can be priceless gifts to those who are often overlooked or forgotten. Your kind words could be a far greater gift than anything you could purchase.

Encouragement can come in many forms. It can be reassurance, inspiration, cheer, or praise. Maybe someone knowing you've "got their back" is far more meaningful than any material gift with lovely wrapping and bow.

For your reflection

- Who might need some affirming words this Christmas?

Prayer for the day

Lord, you send your encouragement through your Holy Word. Let me be liberal in my affirmation toward someone today. Amen.

# SHARING MY LOVE IN MORE DIRECT WAYS THAN GIFTS



DECEMBER 11TH

In the book "The 5 Love Languages", author Gary Chapman shares the different ways people give and receive love; everyone feels loved in different ways.

The 5 love languages are quality time, words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. Arguably, gift-giving is the most well-known way we express our love to others...especially at Christmas. So with that thought in mind, is there a different way to share with someone how they are loved this Christmas? The next few days of devotional thoughts will show a broader way of sharing love other than gifts.

### 1st Love Language - Quality time

"Be devoted to each other like a loving family. Excel in showing respect for each other." Romans 12:10 (GW)

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give to another is our uninterrupted time. Time in which we stop everything else, look the other person in the eye, show them our full attention, and truly listen. Sounds luxurious, doesn't it?

There may be someone on your Christmas gift list that quality time is exactly what they need.

### For your reflection

- Who in your life needs your time and attention?

---

- How will you share that you want to spend quality time with them as your gift?

---

---

### Prayer for the day

Loving God, clothe me in yourself and enable me to love as you love. Amen.