



This is the last Growth Guide for 2016. The Growth Guide will resume in January.

THIS WEEK'S SCRIPTURES

Luke 2: 39-52, Luke 2:1-7, Matthew 1:18-24,
Luke 1:26-56, Acts 2:42, Luke 9:1-6

DAY 1

Many Christians complain about the commercialism, materialism, and secularism that seem to dominate the Christmas season. At the same time, we often participate in the very customs that lead to our complaints. **Read Luke 2:8-14.** Do we reflect the kind of joy found in this scripture? Our attitudes and behavior ought to demonstrate the hope, peace, joy and love that we seek, and that we want for others during the Advent and Christmas seasons. What can we do to ensure that we reflect Jesus - *the One Who Saves*, and Emmanuel - *God with Us* to others during the world's seasonal madness?

- Sit quietly and pray about the ways that you can reflect the real meaning of Christmas in the midst of the holiday hustle and bustle.
- Identify those places and situations where you can be a source of hope, peace, joy and love to others during the weeks ahead.

Make a conscious and intentional commitment to exchange attitudes of cynicism for hope, anxiousness for peace, irritability for joy, and intolerance for love, both in your heart and in your interactions with family, neighbors and strangers during the

remainder of this Christmas season. Ask God for help.

DAY 2

Read Matthew 6:28-30. Jesus taught us that we spend too much time worrying about physical necessities instead of righteousness. Sometimes our searches for perfect Christmas gifts demonstrate the same type of focus on "things" rather than people. Much of our time during the Advent season is taken up looking for perfect gifts for friends and family. So often we sacrifice time that we could spend paying attention to people we love - a gift of presence - searching for presents instead! How are you spending your precious commodity of time this Advent?

- Reflect on the best present you ever gave to the most important person in your life. Next reflect on the best time or times you shared together. Which had the longest lasting impact?
- Are you spending a lot of time away from those you love doing things that are "Christmas busyness?"

Pray for guidance on how to find balance between presence and presents this holiday season.

DAY 3

Read Luke 10:25-37. Christ's words in the story of the Good Samaritan teach us that the greatest gift we can give is love, especially when we give it to someone who is hurting. Loving our neighbors can be hard work that requires us to get out of our comfort zones to meet new people or engage someone who we don't know well. For someone who is lonely or alone this Christmas season, an invitation to join others in celebrating Christ's birth might be the greatest gift of love you can give.

- Think about people you know who have suffered a loss or who might be spending this season of joy isolated or alone.

- Do you have a neighbor or co-worker who lives alone or is unable to travel to be with loved ones this Christmas? Would Christmas dinner with you or your family be a gift of love to that person?

Ask God to give you the courage and generosity of spirit to invite someone who might spend Christmas alone to one of our worship services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, or to your home for Christmas dinner.

DAY 4

When we celebrate our birthdays, we usually receive gifts rather than give gifts to others. Yet on Christmas, the day we celebrate the Christ child's birthday, we plan to give and receive gifts for everyone but Jesus! Mike Slaughter, in his book titled *Christmas is Not Your Birthday*, reminds us that Jesus considers our service to others as a gift to Jesus himself. **Read Matthew 25:34-40.** Is it possible that we have our gift giving and receiving practices out of sync with what the Bible teaches?

- Reflect on the ways you serve the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, lonely or oppressed people who live right here in our local community. Is there something more you are being called to do?
- How can you give the gift of food, water, clothing, companionship, or hope to someone who society neglects but Jesus loves?
- Write a Christmas Birthday card or note to Jesus. Make a commitment to give Jesus a gift through your service to someone that Jesus loves and who is in need. Hang the card on you Christmas tree or display with the cards you receive as a reminder of your promise. Then deliver the gift.

DAY 5

Christmas is only a week away. Then comes New Year's Day with all its hope, promise, and New Year's resolutions!

John Ortberg, suggests that being "rich toward God" is a way of living our lives focused on doing righteous and eternal things like "growing a soul that is increasingly healthy and good." He is referring to spiritual health and our relationship with the One who created us and who redeems us. What better gift can you give God this Christmas than a promise to dedicate yourself to cultivating your relationship?

- Reflect on the ways you have focused on your will rather than God's will this year. Pray the Lord's Prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you live into the words "Thy will be done."
- Identify the baggage that weighs you down and prevents you from living into the fullness of life in Christ - then reflect on the ways you can leave that baggage behind.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to begin a process of discerning a real and meaningful New Year's resolution oriented on your own spiritual health and your relationship with God. You're going to see this one again in a few weeks, so get a head start now! Think of it as a present to God that will keep on giving.

DAY 6

Today is your "Sabbath" and a time for reflection. How has God been speaking to you over the week? Use what the Lord has said to you to remold and reshape your life. If you are having trouble hearing God's voice, slow down or even stop what you are doing so that the busyness of life's demands do not squelch the whispers of God's language of love upon your heart.

