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# The Importance of Santa

by Kevin Haislip

**O**ften people we initially dislike become friends. It is easy to prejudge someone without fully understanding them. It can even be that way with Santa Claus.

## A Surprise

I always thought of Santa Claus as a commercial fabrication whose legends were born of tasteless and ridiculous tales. Modern Santa may well have been an editor's contrivance, but anyone who takes the time to study him finds a true treasure, someone worth knowing and telling your children about.

One afternoon, a friend of mine who owns a reindeer ranch (yes, there really are reindeer) invited me to meet several area Santas who were coming for photographs with the animals. I was surprised. Most of the Santas I met are strong evangelical believers in Jesus Christ. They relished the role of Santa, and it wasn't simply because people, especially children, loved Santa. It was more about whom Santa represents, the person we know as Saint Nicholas. These men and their wives loved the Lord and found this role a dynamic opportunity to tell children and families about Jesus.

As I talked with them and listened to their stories, I was intrigued and began seeking information about Nicholas (a.k.a. Santa). My discoveries surprised me. Aside from all the myths, there is a lot that people do not commonly know.

## The Acts of Saint Nicholas

Santa is important to our Christmas celebrations because of what he embodies. True, he is a made-up character for American consumerism, but he is also a direct depiction of the original Saint Nicholas. Santa reflects Nicholas through character traits such as unconditional love, love of children, secret and unselfish generosity, goodness, kindness, and being a carrier of joy and blessing to others.

The legends and written accounts of Nicholas tell us he was born around AD 275 in Patara, in Asia Minor on the eastern Mediterranean coast (today known as Turkey). His parents were strong believers in Jesus Christ and raised him in a God-fearing home. When he was a young teenager, both his parents died of the plague. So Nicholas went to live with his uncle Nicholas, who was an abbot in a nearby monastery.

Stories tell how Nicholas gave away much of his inherited wealth even before he became a priest. The most famous story happened while he was a young man. A





man who had been rich but had lost everything had three daughters coming of age who needed marriage dowries. The better the bride's dowry, the better the husband she would marry. Without dowries, the girls would not find husbands, and their parents would sell them as servants or even prostitutes.

Nicholas learned of the family's situation and determined to help the man and his daughters. Late one night as everyone slept, he sneaked to their home and tossed a bag of gold coins through the window for the eldest daughter's dowry. The story goes that by accident the bag landed in the girl's stocking hung over the fireplace. Of course, in the morning when the father and daughters awoke and the eldest daughter found a bag of gold coins in her stocking where none had been the night before, they were very happy, but they wondered who put the coins there.

A few nights later, Nicholas again visited this family and tossed another bag of gold through the window for the middle daughter. Again, the father and daughters were overwhelmed with delight and wondered who brought these gifts.

On another night, Nicholas paid one last visit to this family, but the father had determined to find who gave his daughters these wonderful presents. As Nicholas sneaked up to the house prepared to toss in the bag of gold, the father surprised him and learned the identity of their generous benefactor. Nicholas had determined to give the gifts secretly, but because of this story and others like it, Nicholas became known throughout the region as the "gift giver" and lover of children.

## Santa is important to our Christmas celebrations because of what he embodies.

This story explains why Santa does his gift giving secretly late at night after everyone has gone to bed. It also explains why we hang stockings on a fireplace mantle on Christmas Eve. In St. Nicholas's time, children hung their socks up to dry at the end of the day. It also tells us why Santa comes through chimneys, though the actual story relates that he had tossed the bag of gold through an open window.

### Because of Christ

Nicholas greatly loved God and spent much time studying at the monastery. He became a priest and, in time, was consecrated as bishop of Myra.

During Roman Emperor Diocletian's reign, around the year AD 303, the emperor ordered people throughout the empire to worship the Roman

gods. The order's intent was to persecute Christians who refused to worship any other god than the one true and living God. The Romans imprisoned many Christians, including Bishop Nicholas, who spent five years in solitary confinement.

Diocletian resigned in AD 305, and Constantine became the new emperor the following year. Constantine began releasing the Christians, and Bishop Nicholas was finally free from his prison cell around AD 308.

### Zealous for the Gospel and Good Works

After prison, Bishop Nicholas determined to rid the region of the false gods and Roman idols and concentrated his energies on the temple of Artemis. With deliberate force and zeal, he began by removing the idols and shrines and destroying the great temple, leaving little trace of it.

Nicholas was exceptional because of his great love for others, his example of sacrificial generosity, and his care for the poor and needy where he lived. Others have said that he fully exemplified Christ in all he did—in his continued generous giving, in his defense of the faith, and in his faithful teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. People attributed many miracles to God's working in Nicholas's life. Among them was the healing of a woman's withered hand, exorcising demons, saving travelers and a ship from an overwhelming storm, saving three generals from death, and providing grain to the region during great famine.

Myra was a seaport on the Mediterranean Sea, and ships from around the world docked to trade or pick up goods for export. Sailors would come into the region, hear of Nicholas, and perhaps even meet him at the docks. As the sailors' stories of St. Nicholas spread throughout the Roman Empire, he became an example of love and generosity characteristic of Christians at the time. Their love for one another, love of others in their community, and sacrificial giving changed the culture.

Nicholas died December 6, AD 343. He lived considering others' interests as more important than his own. He would not have wished for others to revere him because he was a humble man. He performed his actions in secret to bless others and sacrificially gave all he had.

### A True Disciple

As I considered Nicholas's life and Santa's role today, I donned the Santa suit and met nearly 9,000 children one season. Among the first who came through were nine-year-old Anne and her brother, Denny. Denny, confined to a wheelchair, had cerebral palsy. Anne and I talked for a while, and I asked her

what she wanted for Christmas. She said, "I wish that my brother would have a happy Christmas. He has so much trouble doing things and can't go play with us. And the other kids are very mean to him and call him names." Before Anne, Denny, and their mom left the Toyland set, we bowed our heads and prayed together for Denny's healing and joy of the season.

Of all the thousands of children who came through, Anne was one of about twenty-five children (mostly girls) who asked nothing for themselves. Another's blessing mattered to them more than what they wanted. That is a heart born of Christ and lived out in the lives of Nicholas and many Christians through the millennia.

We see the traits of a true disciple of Christ in Nicholas's life. He is a hero of our faith, someone like Paul, whom we follow as we seek to follow Jesus's leading. My wife and I began teaching our children about Nicholas (a.k.a. Santa), who carried Christ's cross in his life and ministry. And we encourage our children to be "secret givers." Remembering Nicholas on this day is no different from remembering George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day, but we do not know exactly when He was born. Taking time to explore and learn

about St. Nicholas does not take away from Christ's birth. It shows us a life that changed because Christ came. Without Jesus, there would be no example in Nicholas's life.

Jesus tells His disciples to live in such a way that all men will know the light of the world. The light of a Christian life is the love of God in Jesus Christ. Nicholas lived so that others could clearly see Christ in him.

There are excellent, free resources available about Nicholas's life. The best I have found is online at [www.stnicholascenter.org](http://www.stnicholascenter.org).

**Editors Note:** December 6 is Saint Nicholas Day. The Murphy children receive gifts in their stockings on this day. This helps keep the Christmas celebration focused on Jesus.

The Haislips have homeschooled since 1984 and have six years remaining. Kevin and his wife Jody are the parents of fifteen children: two biological children and thirteen adopted special needs children. Two dependent children remain at home. In the fall of 2008, after returning from a mission working in an orphanage, Kevin was enlisted to be a mail Santa. From those charming conversations of things children say to Santa, he wrote a book titled, *Conversations with Santa*. The book is available in U. S. bookstores. You can write the author at [www.SantasHope.com](http://www.SantasHope.com).

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