

What if, instead of staying inside my thick, introverted shell, I prayed

kendra broekhuis



here goes
Nothing

an introvert's reckless
attempt to love her neighbor

list, I pray for God to guide my daily activities? What if instead of

waiting for people to knock on our door, I intentionally looked for ways to show Christ's love and kindness?

for courage to step out and build relationships with our neighbors? What if, instead of making a to-do



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*For Jesus. Who loved me first.
And for my neighbors. Who I want
to better love in return.*

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Before We Get Started

*God does not need our good works,
but our neighbor does.*

—Martin Luther¹

This is not a success story.

And it's not one of those stories that has a beginning, a middle, and then a perfectly tidy end either. It's really just a beginning.

You see, for thirty days I prayed, God, help me to maintain the joy of being Wife and Mommy amid the daily grind. To see the world through God's eyes. To live intentionally. To build relationships and share Christ's love with our neighbors. To learn what it really means to give. To collide motherhood with mission.

This became my motto, my credo, my personal mission statement of sorts.

Some days it led to actions the Lord gently nudged me to take. Other days it led to reflections the Lord gently whispered into my heart. Every day it led to one word, one underlying theme that tied all thirty days—all thirty chapters—and their wide variety of topics together: *giving*.

These thirty days found us in a strange time of transition. (September 29 through October 29, 2014, to be exact.)

Before We Get Started

We had just moved back to the United States after teaching for three years in the beautiful country of Guatemala. We were living in a new city, residing in a new apartment building, and searching for a new church. And we wanted to put it all together: all of our experiences, all of the things we had just seen and learned and read and discussed. I wouldn't call it a clean slate—just a chance to live intentionally.

Before we moved back to the United States, we sat down with our dear friends and InnerCHANGE missionaries, Nate and Myra. They gave us guidance to work through our transition, as well as our desire as a family to pursue more than our own happiness. When we asked them, “What do we do first?” their answer was this: “Get to know your neighbors.”

It might sound like strange advice, but it made sense. Jesus told us to love God and love our neighbor. Many times the word *neighbor* is meant to be vague, but our friends knew that it shouldn't always be. They knew that part of being mission-minded, no matter where you live or work, is being willing to love the people closest to you, people you often overlook. I tell you this because our neighbors—as in the people who lived in the other eleven apartments in our building—were who I often found the Lord's generosity overflowing to and from during these thirty days.

Sitting in the kitchen of our apartment in Guatemala, listening to Nate and Myra's advice, I felt excited, inspired. But one long bus ride to the airport, two flights to the United States, and three months later, the idea of actually focusing our lives on connecting with strangers made me want to dry heave just a little bit.

Like the typical introvert, being around new people for an extended amount of time makes me weary. And when a

stranger enters my personal-space bubble, a whole host of physical changes happen in my body. My everywhere begins to sweat. I worry that I need an extra swab of deodorant or a breath mint. My mouth turns to cotton, and from the pit of my stomach emerges a host of butterflies. And if I can get past the physical hurdles of meeting someone new, then I have to get past the mental block of trying to think of a good question to ask, which quickly turns into twenty dumb questions I shouldn't ask.

I mean the whole scenario is like watching Middle School and Puberty get married and have a baby named Awkward. I can give socializing with strangers a good effort, but then I usually need a prescription of lonely solitude for at least an hour after the ordeal. Which is why when people talk about things like building relationships and sharing the gospel with my neighbors, I would rather take a second and throw up in Baby's diaper bag.

But I'm afraid that at times I let my introvertism become an excuse, that maybe I play that card too often. Unfortunately, our technology-obsessed culture is not helping me develop the courage and social skills to look into people's eyes and just say hello. I hover behind my screens instead of being available to those I pass by every day. I avoid relationships that take more work than using my thumbs to text. I say, "Hello, how are you?" and "Good, you?" to our neighbors and never take the next steps to get to know them.

But what if, instead of staying inside my thick, introverted shell, I prayed for courage to step out and build relationships with our neighbors? What if, instead of making a to-do list, I prayed for God to guide my daily activities? What if, instead

of waiting for people to knock on our door, I intentionally looked for ways to show Christ's love and kindness?

Here goes nothing, I thought, and so began thirty days of finding out a few answers to these questions. *What if?* Well, God just might give you a small taste of what it means to recklessly love your neighbor.

Now, a few disclaimers.

Disclaimer #1: I don't believe any generous thing I do can earn my way to heaven.

I believe only the generous thing Jesus has already done can save me, faith in Christ alone.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph. 2:8–9)

I believe that giving is part of the answer to “Now what?” As in, “I believe in You, Jesus! But now what?” Because right after the verses about God's grace and our faith, it says this:

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
(v. 10)

Generosity is essential not because I think I can earn my way to heaven, but because I have been given eternal life in heaven, for free. I give not out of a futile mind-set of repayment, but out of sheer gratitude.

Disclaimer #2: My circumstances are different than yours.

Our situations, relationships, experiences, life-stages,

histories, husbands, babies, parenting styles, denominations, ages, in-laws, education, houses, bills of health, finances, locations, and methods of wiping our bottoms may be different from each other's. And that's okay; that's great.

I am "just" a stay-at-home mom. My husband is "just" a high school science teacher. At the time these thirty days happened, we had "just" one fourteen-month-old daughter. We lived in "just" a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment, and we owned "just" one car and two bikes. While we can't compare lives, I pray we can encourage one another, challenge one another, and cheer one another on, even in our differences.

Disclaimer #3: The resources at the end of each chapter are optional.

I provided reflection questions, actions to take, and passages to read. All are meant to be extensions for anyone looking to take that chapter's concept of giving deeper. But I don't want to be the bearer of unnecessary guilt, unrealistic expectations, or overworked schedules. Use the "To Take This Deeper" resources if that's what the Lord is laying on your heart; don't otherwise. I don't know your life. You do; God does.

Disclaimer #4: This is not an easy, thirty-day plan for how to become a generous person.

Like I said, it's not a success story. And the command to love God and love your neighbor is not always effortless. It's a lifelong lesson that's about as comfortable to learn as middle school sex-ed, and about as easy as teaching middle school sex-ed class.

So whether you are making the commitment to read this book one day at a time, one page at a time; by binge reading; or in a book club with your besties, I pray with my whole

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heart that God will use it to encourage you, challenge you, and cheer you on both to *recognize* His message of “I love you” in the everyday moments of your own life, and to *be* His message of “I love you” to the everyday people in your life.



Give the Gift of Stress This Christmas

Give Gifts

*We are once again spending money
we don't have on things we don't need
to give to people we don't like.*

—Stephen Colbert¹

Every year, my family and I have the same conversation roughly one to two months before Christmas: How are we going to handle buying presents for each other during the holidays?

I have strong opinions about Christmas presents. We have a way of ruining a perfectly good holiday with the stress we put on our calendars or finances or emotions in the quest to buy the perfect gifts for people who already have everything. It doesn't help that I am a horrible gift giver—just ask every person I have ever been Secret Santa to. (“Would a candy bar

from the gas station wrapped in a sticky note be high on your wish list?") It also doesn't help that my love language is not gifts. ("How about your gift to *me* is that I don't have to buy a gift for *you*, mm-kay, Pumpkin?")

But Jiminy Christmas. I feel like the tradition of giving gifts for the holidays has gone a little haywire. I mean, let's talk Black Friday for two secs. On the *Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert called Black Friday the "holiest" day of the year, when "Americans come together to bow before their lord, the Walmart rollback guy. 'Cause Jesus isn't the only one who saves."²

I laugh because it's satire, but I cry a little because it's true. How is it that one day after we say, "Gracious Lord, thank You for the abundance You have blessed us with," we say, "*I need more! More! More! At three in the morning! And I will throat-punch your grandma to be the first in line to get more!*"

Ironic? Sick? Wrong?

I once wrote a blog post called "Christmas: It's Not Our Birthday Party,"³ the point being Christmas gifts have a way of making me think this holiday is all about me and mine. They have a way of instilling the attitude of "I deserve this" and leading me to think I should expect to receive gifts. But "deserve" and "expect" strip away the actual meaning of the word *gift* and make it sound a lot more like the word *payment*.

Christmas gifts also have a way of manipulating my mind to turn wants into needs. When I make my Christmas list, I try to think of stuff I need, and when I can't think of anything, I try to think of stuff I want, and then the stuff I want picks at my brain until I am convinced that I need it. But I know that when I actually need something, I go out and buy it without waiting until Christmas. I know it takes a lot of

convincing to look at my piles of Christmas gifts and honestly say, “I needed that.”

I just hate how we have made celebrating the holidays so darn complicated. Since when wasn't it enough to enjoy one another's presence and conversation and laughter? Since when wasn't it enough to soak up what was already the Gift to us—*the birth of our Savior*?

Now, the Great Christmas-Gift Debate is something to argue about only with the people who claim Luke 2 in their lives, whose purpose for celebrating *Christmas* is to rejoice in the birth of Jesus. This is not something to argue about with the people whose purpose for celebrating *the holidays* is to take a picture with Santa and eat honey-baked ham. Those are two very different groups who are not thinking from the same starting point of Scripture.

But as Christians, as people who know that Christ's birth involved a stable, a few people, a couple of animals, a manger filled with hay, good news of great joy, a host of angels, and almost nothing else, I feel like we should be a little more leery of how much time, emotion, and money we put into the upkeep of our Christmas traditions. Maybe the extent of our traditional Christmas money-spending and stuff-accumulating should make us feel a little more uncomfortable. In his book *Under the Overpass*, Mike Yankoski wrote,

Be relentlessly suspicious of your comfortable life, and of the comfort zones that render so many Christian fellowships insensitive and ineffective in our communities. God calls us all to more. And you and I can lead the way, one small step at a time.⁴

Here Goes Nothing

In some ways, haven't our Christmas traditions become a comfort zone where we think it's okay to spend and hoard for ourselves? God says things like, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt. 6:19), and "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Luke 12:33), and "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Tim. 6:8). So why do I think that Christmas gives me the right to throw all that out the window? What if we could do *differently* as families and as the church?

Now, I realize Black Friday does not fully represent Christmas-gift giving, or giving gifts in general. I realize that some people's love language *is* gifts, and that there is nothing wrong with feeling loved when someone buys you the perfect gift. I realize that some people have an amazing talent at finding the perfect gifts, at the perfect time, with the perfect attitude. I realize that it is good to give good things to our children. I realize that giving gifts, like any kind of giving, requires sacrifices of our time, emotions, and finances. I realize I have zero control over grandparents who like to spoil their grandchildren. And finally, I realize, as my dear friend said so perfectly, "Giving for the holidays is not just for the spiritually immature who don't care about the third world."

But I'm in search of simplicity here, and I'm in search of answers to a few questions: Are we sacrificing things we shouldn't be—like our sanity—in the name of Christmas tradition? Are we focusing too much on satisfying our own family's *wants* instead of fulfilling another family's *needs*? Contrary to Colbert's quote before the chapter, I do like my family and my family likes one another. Which helped us have that candid conversation about how we wanted to handle Christmas-gift giving that year. Which helped us talk about

where our gift giving was appropriate and where we could redirect our giving instead.

Gift giving can't always be avoided, but it doesn't have to be as complicated as we have made it either. Here are a few ideas we have tried over the years in my family and in Husband's family to do things differently. These ideas try to alleviate one or more stresses related to gift giving: the pressure to choose the perfect gift, the unnecessary stuff we accumulate, and the money we spend. A few of these ideas try to help us focus outside ourselves completely. It can be good to give gifts, and it can also be good to rethink our gift giving to make it more purposeful, to recklessly love our neighbors.

Limit the number of gifts per person. The Savior of the world received three gifts around His second birthday. My sister limited her kids' gifts to four by incorporating "something you want, something you need, something to wear, something to read." Giving good things to our children does not mean giving all the things to them.

Draw names and choose a theme. Instead of buying gifts for everyone in Husband's family, we draw names (either individuals or couples) and give one themed gift. Themes we have done before include games, books, and shopping from thrift stores.

Give gift cards. It's almost completely thoughtless, but sometimes it's nice to give the gift of choice. My siblings and our parents contribute a bunch of gift cards, and we all play Bingo to win them as prizes. We compete, we bond, we have fun. And nobody goes home with the same number of gift cards to fuel continued sibling rivalry.

Be present to give a present. You are not expected to buy a gift for an event you can't be present for. My siblings

are more than welcome to roll their eyes at this one, as we almost never make it to my nieces' and nephews' birthday parties from out of town.

Give what you are able. We often collaborate to buy gifts for our parents. We don't try to contribute the same amount of money, but rather each person gives what he or she can according to his or her budget. Nobody complains or feels pressure to do otherwise.

Give experiences. My parents have often given experiences to the grandkids instead of gifts. Trips to a theme park, vacations at their cottage, memberships to the zoo, babysitting services so that Mommy and Daddy can go away for a weekend. We prefer gifts that create memories instead of clutter, gifts that will have a much bigger impact on their lives than a toy.

Intentionally match the gifts you give your family to your community. What says, "I love my neighbor as much as I love myself" by choosing to give as much as you receive? This might mean filling a Christmas shoebox for a child in poverty around the world or having your kids pick out a gift to give to another child in need in your community. This could also mean sending extra money to your church's missionaries overseas to allow them a special splurge.

Give twofold. There are plenty of places to shop for stuff that will in turn support great causes and people. For example, Noonday Collections is a standout fashion company who empowers artisans living in poverty all over the globe. Or shop from people you know, like small business owners in your community, or your mom friends who are trying to make a living from home selling cleaning products, skin care, and essential oils.

Give to a good cause. One year, in lieu of gifts, we decided as a family to donate money to Gospel for Asia, a mission organization that preaches the gospel to unreached people groups. We enjoyed the relief from giving one another gifts so much that we have never returned to the same volume of gift giving since.

The conversation with my family about gift giving took place in the middle of October; we hadn't even reached Thanksgiving, as if that ever stopped anyone from talking about Christmas. But part of me just wanted to dwell on the peace of that night in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. Part of me wanted to feel that same peace and overwhelming joy of celebrating the time that God chose to come to Earth in the flesh.

Part of me wanted to return to the simple yet profound message of Christ saying, *Remember that time I gave up everything so that I would be one step closer to saving you from the eternal destruction you were doomed for since birth? Remember, beyond the white noise and messes of tinsel, that silent and holy night I entered this world as an innocent, vulnerable baby?*

So much of that has been lost in the name of tradition, in the chaos and stress of planning the perfect parties with the perfect food and the perfect gifts. I don't want the reason I choose to forgo gift giving to be purely selfish, to be purely the case of a bad attitude. Any kind of giving requires a sacrifice of time or money or emotions. But I want to do it well, with purpose.

Child, remember. Remember that giving gifts is not all about you and yours, but about them and theirs too—those neighbors near and far who have needs much more imminent

Here Goes Nothing

than your wants. Remember the birth of My Son was about My good news of great joy that is for all people.

Child, remember. A Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.

To Take This Deeper

Give Gifts

- **Reflect:** What kinds of attitudes are you instilling in yourself and your children about gifts? Does your attitude demonstrate that it is actually better to give than receive? Are there traditions that stress you out and keep you from enjoying the simple beauty of this holiday that originated in a stable with a few people, a couple animals, and a manger filled with hay?
- **Take Action:** Discuss as a family how you can focus not just inwardly on yourselves in your gift giving, but on sharing Christ's love with your neighborhood, or those neighborhoods nearby that Christians like to avoid, or those neighborhoods around the world that are literally starving.
- **Read:** Read 1 Timothy 6:6-19. Don't be hindered by the constant search for more stuff. Find contentment in your basic needs and give generously.