



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Where ever we tune in, listening to the news or frequenting social media, it is clear that holiday shopping has officially begun. In area churches we are singing choruses celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, and some church bells are ringing out these all-too-familiar Christmas melodies, for all to hear. Each year, Christmas seemingly becomes this magical transformation in our social lives and community. Colors burst into our neighbourhoods as houses around the region are adorned with festive lights. During Christmas, 'celebrations,' rather than the Lord, becomes the main focus for many individuals and families, where the blemishes and pains of real life are brushed away into the dark corners of silence.

That is, until one glimpses into the shadows to see the harsh realities that exist (and a key dynamic in SNLM's counsel work), that often become magnified during the Christmas season. The desired "peace on Earth" is disrupted by intrusive circumstances, pain of the past, difficult family members, death of a loved one, financial strain, anger, unforgiveness, isolation, and loneliness, *etc.* – and admittedly true in many church families.

This Christmas, may we be blessed of God to be sensitive that for many of those around us, that all may not be bright. That there are likely those who could benefit from grace and the love of Christ whose life and birth we joyously celebrate; more pointedly at this time of year. When dealing with others who are experiencing difficulty, here are some helpful thoughts and considerations:

- **Difficult Family Members:** remember the sobering words of Jesus Christ who said, "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who abuse you . . . If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:27, 32). Love, however, is not an option, it is a command (love our neighbour, love our enemy), *i.e.* we have no exemption; and the home front can often times seem like the enemy's camp. Let's pray not to fixate on how irritating or frustrating a family member may be or how others may need to change. Let's encourage ourselves and our families to live for the higher, more glorious purpose in Christ, for which we were created. As Christians, may we recognize that a flawed family member's character might be the powerful context in which they can (by God's grace) change to more accurately reflect Him (Romans 8:28-29); prayerfully as He has done for us. When gathering with family let's consider our primary agenda – *i.e.* what will build for peace and harmony rather than division and hurt? – what will glorify God over the enemy? – to let love and forgiveness find a bridge to a better day – for this is the will of God. The Bible says we **can** do all things in Christ who strengthens us, where if I say I can't, am I really telling God I won't? – *and* is this the real heart issue I need to take to Him? If so, be quick to address it, and let's use the struggles of the season to live out the greater call of God.

- **Facing a loss - a first Christmas without him or her:** as Christians we are exhorted in Philippians 4:13, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Believers in Jesus Christ will grieve, but their grieving should be a different shape than the grief of nonbelievers. There is no silver-bullet to relieve the pain of loss - but keeping Christ at the center of grief will make all the difference. As helpers, we can – first - help alleviate the intensity of loss through kind words, showing interest, or offering a loving gesture in order to “love God” and “love our neighbour” (Matthew 22:37-39). Second, we can encourage thankfulness for the good times and the precious memories; and seek and console others as we are consoled. Third, we can help others recall the precious gift of the beloved Redeemer - his giving of his own life so that death would be eternally destroyed; to offer thanks for this amazing sacrifice. Fourth, we can be a prayer support, and even on our own when others are not open to praying.
- **Financial Strain:** in good stewardship, we must all resist seasonal and cultural pressures to overspend, simply for the sake of pleasing others. Let’s help others to interpret Christmas as a season in which God’s hand of mercy is sparing them and their families from the vainness of commercialization. It is good to review and contemplate the wisdom of Paul who said, “In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (Philippians 4:12). Let’s count ourselves blessed to understand and revert to the deeper meaning of Christmas, in Christ.
- **Isolation and Loneliness:** all of us should be wise and purposed in our hearts to be focused on loving God and others all year long (Matthew 22:37-39). Let’s plan to be a blessing in doing kindnesses to others, be they family, friend, or a neighbour; rather than anticipating the dread of how miserable we/they are going to be this Christmas. When we or others seem alone, let’s find our encouragement through taking refuge in God, to sense anew that God is with us. As always, alone time might be an opportune time to open our Bible and read the glorious story of redemption that God has freely given to ‘who-so-ever-will’. Refuse to wallow in self-pity. This year join a carolling party, attend community services, serve at a community dinner, schedule a time to take a walk, and experience the eternal presence of our Creator, gazing upon the beauty of His artistry (Romans 1:19-20). Let’s worship our Saviour with intention this year, who sits at the right hand of God, interceding on our behalf! We are not alone, and His promise is the same yesterday, today, and forever – that He will never leave us nor forsake us. Let’s offer up the sacrifice of praise and seek Him with our whole heart, soul and mind, celebrating Christmas in real worship.

By God’s grace, may He help us to remain diligent, as brothers and sisters in Christ, in our mindfulness to those who may be enduring a rather difficult season in their personal lives, especially at Christmas. It can present us with a prime opportunity to live out our divine calling and fulfill the great commission – reaching out to others with the love and compassion of Christ!

No need to go it alone. Services at South Niagara Life Ministries are free and we make effort over the Christmas season to be available to those who are in genuine emergency – even though we are on holiday hours and staffing. Messages at 905-871-0236 will be picked up and responded to as soon as possible.

Thanks to all who have supported SNLM’s mission this year. God Bless you all, on behalf of SNLM’s team.