

5 Ways to Put the Spirit of Thanksgiving into Christmas

Jennifer Shaw

Christmas seems to come around faster every year, and with each new season, people seem more stressed. Whether it is not enough time or money, hard-to-please kids, or strained relations with relatives, it becomes more difficult to slow down and maintain meaning and gratitude at this time of year. Since retailers now decorate for Christmas *before* Thanksgiving, it's time we brought the Thanksgiving to Christmas! Here are five practical ideas:

Reach Out

The fastest way to increase thankfulness is to focus on others. It puts things in perspective. You could serve a meal at a homeless shelter or take your kids to visit people in a nursing home. You could offer to help stock the shelves at a food pantry or bring a meal to someone who is lonely or ill. Every year we pack shoe boxes for Operation Christmas Child that are sent to kids in poverty all around the world. I have the kids pack things they would want themselves and then we send them to a child their age. This teaches our kids to serve others and be thankful for what they have, and it always reminds me of my blessings. We have also encouraged our children from a young age to give handmade or personalized gifts. One of the greatest joys for me is seeing that they are often more excited to give their gifts than to see what they received, because they spent so much time and thought on what others would enjoy.

Downsize

Christmas can be overwhelmingly materialistic. Take the emphasis off acquisition by giving the gift of experiences or time together, or gifts that remind your family of their blessings and the needs of others. Give your family a zoo membership or tickets to a show or game you can attend together. In our family, it's become a joke that we always get practical things like socks and toothbrushes in our stockings along with little fun things, but it's a reminder that we are blessed to have the things we need, and not to take them for granted. We often give the kids the gift of choosing something from Compassion International's Gift Catalog such as clean water or emergency food for a family in poverty, and they love knowing they are making a difference for someone else. One good rule I have tried to adhere to when it comes to gifts for kids is, "Something you need, something you want, something we can do together."

Draw In

If you don't have any family traditions, this is a great time to start some! Every year we make a unique kind of cookie together and then drop them off on neighbors' porches. We spend one day making a special coffee cake that is only eaten on Christmas morning. When I was growing up, we set out a "manger" and made it ready for Jesus by doing kind things for each other in secret, and for every good deed, you got to add a piece of hay. Since we have allergies to hay now, it's evolved to pieces of paper, and this year we're going to take it a step further and write on the paper which character trait we showed in our good deed like kindness, patience, or thoughtfulness. We have traditions for our little family, as well as traditions for our extended families, and that gives our kids a sense of belonging and connects us to a deeper experience of the Christmas season.

Re-Think

Things are not going to be perfect. Everyone is not going to adore everything you got them, and you're not going to make an amazing Christmas dinner while keeping your hair flawless. Choose the things that are most important to you, prioritize them, and don't be afraid to say no to the things that will get in the way. It's okay if you don't go to a fourth neighborhood cookie swap or agree to organize the church Christmas pageant while your whole family is in town. It's okay if your Christmas tree looks crazy because you decided to decorate it all together with homemade ornaments rather than choosing the perfect color-coordinated scheme. And realize that saying no to some things allows you the time to really enjoy the things you have decided are most important to you.

Look Up

You've heard it before, but Christmas is not about stuff and Santa. Christmas is one of the holiest holidays on the Christian calendar. In the weeks before Christmas (called Advent on the Christian calendar), our family reads a page of our Advent book each night after dinner, every day telling a bit more of the Christmas story. On Christmas morning, we always sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, and then read the story in its entirety from the [Bible](#) before we open presents. It's a reminder of what this season is about and teaches our kids what we are actually celebrating.

Christmas can be overwhelming, but it is also an opportunity to love and care for others. If we can remember to be thankful, it will make it less hairy and more merry.

Jennifer Shaw is a Telly Award winning speaker, author, singer, songwriter and five-time Top 40 Billboard artist. She is also a wife and mother of three whose favorite holiday is Christmas. Visit her online at www.jennifershaw.com.

Publication date: December 12, 2014

;