



INFINITUM

12 Habits of Christmas

The 12 Days of Christmas has its roots both within Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity.

Commencing on Christmas Day it is an opportunity to celebrate the birth of Christ and prepare for the new year through a variety of feasts and traditions. The 12 days end with Epiphany; the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the arrival of the Magi in the nativity story.

For this year's Advent reflection we have replaced "Days" with "Habits". 12 habits or practices that you can adopt during this season to help you:

Follow Jesus more closely

Love God and others more authentically

Live more generous, surrendered and missional lives.

Infinitum is a practice. As we practically live out lives of love, surrender, generosity and mission, we discover a new depth in our relationship with Jesus.

"We don't think our way into new ways of living but live our way into new ways of thinking."

Richard Rhor

The 12 Habits are written on these 12 gift tag cards. You might choose to use them for 12 days in a row, or revisit them at different moments throughout the Season. Some of the habits require planning/preparation so it might be worth mapping out your journey at the start.

There is room on the back of this introduction to make notes and track your responses. If you meet in a HUB, they can become helpful triggers for questions, conversation and prayer.



A different posture

The aim of this prayer is to help you move from honest confession to a renewed intention: to ensure that our culture's consumerist-commercialism does not steal or dilute the simple joy, power and significance of the arrival of the Christ Child.

You know your own tendencies, habits and temptations during this season, so just use these words as a guide and shape your prayer accordingly. Maybe even focus on one particular aspect or theme for that day or week.

Surrender From Fists Up to Hands Up

I confess the ways in which I fight for my time, preferences, opinions and desires. I confess my battle with anxiety and worry. I confess my tendency to make life about me

Instead
(Pray this prayer with Hands up)

I choose, like Mary, to surrender myself to you, to fully embrace your Lordship over my life this season. To mirror the dedication and worship of those who gathered to celebrate your birth. Like the Shepherds and the Magi, to go where you lead.

Generosity From Hands shut to Hands open

I confess my fear and selfishness, I confess the pressure and stress I feel of not having enough or doing enough. I confess how all too often I mimic the culture around me. I confess my tendency to just be a consumer this Christmas.

Instead
(Pray this prayer with hands open)

I choose to open my hands up to you again today. To receive the love that sent you to be born among us, and give to others out of the resources that you have so generously lavished on me. To receive thankfully and to give generously.

Mission From Arms Folded to Hands Forward

I confess my apathy and judgements. I confess my tendency to critique rather than construct. I confess my habit of overlooking or ignoring others due to my own busyness.

Instead
(Pray with your hands forward)

I choose to embrace your path for my life today. To embrace the vulnerable, fragile and neglected and consider how I might participate in your mission this season.



1. Those who didn't make the cover

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2:6-7

Rev. Peter Vasko, the director of the Holy Land Foundation, believes that the overcrowded conditions in Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth would have resulted in others being close at hand during Mary's delivery. *'There were others present at the birth of Jesus,'* Vasko said. *"It's human nature to help somebody.'* This idea leaves us with an undocumented community who were present at the most significant moment in history. The people who never made it in that famous Nativity scene on the cover of our Christmas cards.

For this challenge, buy (or create) a set of Christmas cards. Take some time to reflect on those in your community who serve faithfully without the encouragement or recognition they deserve. Take time to pray and write on them messages of gratitude and appreciation. They may be people you see everyday or people you haven't seen in years.



2. A room with a view

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

John 1:14

"Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colours. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving"

Terry Pratchett

Sometimes the most powerful learning occurs in the most unexpected places. For this challenge, find a new place to read and explore the Christmas story with others. This might be in a busy shopping area, a hotel lobby, a hillside at night, a hospital, or a stable. Reading the story beyond the confines of your home and church may shed new light on aspects of the birth of Jesus.



3. Treasures not tokens

They (wise men) entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

The Wise Men came with humility and generosity as they presented their gifts to the Infant king. In some way it was a surprise to see such precious items, but these were carefully considered gifts responding to who Jesus was and would be.

For this challenge, consider who could benefit from a surprise gift this year. As you pray, explore with God what will be the right gift to give. Not just a token of appreciation but a treasure for their identity. Whether given anonymously or not, the opportunity to show generosity and gratitude to someone else maybe life changing for them.



4. The battle to Bethlehem

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Luke 2:4-5

Academics often comment that the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is so briefly described in the Gospels as the writers would assume the reader would know what it was like.

The journey would have been a difficult and dangerous 90 mile / 145 km trek through harsh terrain. The gruelling conditions would have been made worse by the freezing cold nights and rain filled days. The heavily forested valley of the Jordan River was feared by many because of the number of lions, bears and wild boars and the main trade routes were filled with bandits, pirates of the desert and robbers. This was no easy journey.

For this challenge find time to walk with your HUB, friends or family. (Maybe you could accrue 90 miles / 145 km of walking throughout this season!) As you journey, discuss and reflect on the experiences of Mary and Joseph and begin to pray for the 68.5 million displaced people around the world today.



5. Where the action is

There were (shepherds) camping in the neighbourhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, *"Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."*

Luke 2:8-14

Much of the Christmas story occurs outside: Mary and Joseph's visit to Bethlehem, the Shepherd's encounter, the wise men's journey and the flight to Egypt. The sights, sounds and aromas of these experiences can easily be overlooked.

"My best life lessons and education didn't come from a classroom – they've come from the wild. How you act in the big moments, the ones that challenge you, scare you, tempt you, and force you to make the right decisions, is what defines you."

Bear Grylls

For this challenge create time to pray, worship and reflect outside. (You might choose to share this challenge with others and bring songs and instruments or maybe sit in silence and contemplation). As you express your worship in the rain, sun or snow thank God for his provision and presence this season.



6. Have yourself a revolutionary Christmas

What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

Luke 1: 46-55

"The language of Mary's (song) is the narrative of revolution and redistribution, two words that the powers that be just hate. And while the revolution that Christ brings is not violent, it is nonetheless completely transformational. Mary got it."

Jim Wallis

What does revolution and redistribution look like for you this Christmas? So often we limit revolution to large scale events and forget that moments of revolution can happen on daily basis, in the quiet and hidden places.

For this challenge find a person or group of people who wouldn't normally get invited to a Christmas meal. Create a time this season to include them for some food - be it a breakfast, shared lunch or a fancy evening meal.



7. Silent Night

They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed. Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself.

Luke 2:19

"It is not easy to enter into the silence and reach beyond the many boisterous and demanding voices of our world and to discover there the small intimate voice saying: 'You are my Beloved Child, on you my favour rests.'"

Henri Nouwen

Advent is a season of expectation and of waiting. One that points to the world changing reality of Emmanuel, God with us. This time of waiting can so easily be crowded with the cultural assault of noise, busyness and activity.

For this challenge, introduce moments of silence as a regular part of your Christmas preparations. You might want to increase it by a minute per day - building up to 25 or 30 minutes by the end of the month. Use the time not as a temporary escape but as an intentional pursuit of Jesus' voice.



8. From Advert to Advent

The angel answered, "*The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.*" "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "*May your word to me be fulfilled.*" Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:35-38

This season bombards us with messages telling us what we need to buy, where we need to go and what we need to do. It's estimated that we are exposed to over 5000 adverts a day, and this is only heightened in the busy Christmas shopping period.

Choose not to let those messages dictate your habits.

For this challenge take time to consider an item that you could give up this season. It may be take-out coffees, sweets, entertainment, technology or eating out. What could you do with those additional resources and time?



9. Real Christmas Tree

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the (shepherds) talked it over. *"Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us."* They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the (shepherds) were impressed.

Luke 2:15-18

Many people accumulate decorations that have been made by children and friends over the years. It provokes memories and stories when you place them on your Christmas tree.

For this challenge add some new "prayer decorations". Either by yourself or with your children make decorations onto which you can write prayers. These could carry real names of people or places that have challenged or comforted you this past year.

In years to come it will be powerful to see how God has answered these prayers.



10. Carol Contemplations

Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly, *"You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed! And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me? The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears the babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy."*

Luke 1:39-45

For this challenge choose a favourite Carol (give Jingle Bells a miss for this Habit!). Write out a portion of the carol on this gift tag and reflect on the words. Research the carol's history and listen to a variety of people singing it to see how your perspective on the birth of Jesus is changed or deepened.



11. Christmas Mourning

After the scholars were gone, God's angel showed up again in Joseph's dream and commanded, *"Get up. Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay until further notice. Herod is on the hunt for this child, and wants to kill him."*

Joseph obeyed. He got up, took the child and his mother under cover of darkness. They were out of town and well on their way by daylight. They lived in Egypt until Herod's death. This Egyptian exile fulfilled what Hosea had preached: "I called my son out of Egypt."

Matthew 2:13-15

Although often portrayed as a season of joy and gladness, for so many Christmas is a painful and lonely time. For those who have lost family members and friends the celebrations can be hollow and difficult. Some churches hold services of remembrance over the Advent season - where people gather to pause, pray and thank God for their loved one's life. Without these intentions, it can be so easy in the busyness of the season to miss the pain or struggle that some people might be experiencing this year.

For this challenge consider what you could do to support a person or family member during this season. It could be committing to pray for them, planning an evening/meal together or creating a special gift for them.



12. A Different Route

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother.

Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Matthew 2:11-12

The 12 days of Christmas traditionally leads to Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as symbolised by the arrival of the Magi. The story tells that their encounter left them overcome with worship as they bowed down and presented their gifts to the infant King. It was a life-changing experience, which led them to working out 'another route' home.

We don't want to remain the same as we encounter Christ afresh this Christmas season. For this final challenge, explore with others what a 'different route' would look like for you in the coming year. There may be habits or changes that you'd like to put in place in response to God's surrender, generosity and mission expressed in that manger.