

ADVENT CONSPIRACY

FAMILY GUIDE



ADVENT CONSPIRACY FAMILY GUIDE 2016

Unfamiliar with Advent Conspiracy? Here's a little introduction:

First, Advent... what's that? Well, simply put, Advent is a four-week season when we remember the coming of Christ in the past (celebrated on Christmas day), and that He's also literally coming soon to the Earth again, in the future. So what's all the conspiracy about? Sounds rebellious doesn't it?

Advent Conspiracy is conspiratorial in the sense that the angels, the Magi, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph were living out a different story, where meaning and value were completely re-imagined. Christ described it later in many other short stories as the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather than finding security or value in our possessions (as in our current culture), Jesus expressed his power through sacrifice, revealing a new kingdom, with a competing story. And He lived it out in an utterly different way:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. (Philippians 2:6-7)

Similarly: You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

God himself gave everything away to bring us home to be with him!

If you're unfamiliar with Advent Conspiracy and still confused about the title, the quick explanation is that it's not a program to tell you how to do Christmas, and it's also not a protest against Santa or presents. Instead, this "conspiracy" is a chance to re-direct our hearts, away from the desperate consumption of the season towards the values and rhythms Christ cares about as we remember His story.

The intent is that you'd use this family guide, to provide an emphasis on what Christ values most during this season, and to help you as parents or guardians reshape the Christmas season. The hope is to see us all move away from asking, "What can I get?" to "What is Christ asking me to offer to Him and those around me?" And you can see that there isn't an easy formula to answer this question. Instead, it requires that we live attentively to what Christ is doing in our everyday world.

Realistically, as we seek to have our lives display values consistent with what Christ values, we need all the help we can get in resisting the cultural story of Christmas. So alongside this family discussion, we've provided your church with an Advent Conspiracy Sunday kids curriculum in order to help continue this conversation in your broader community.

May you conspire to live with hearts fixed on Christ this holiday season!

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU START:

Over the years, we've learned that when we bring up Advent and start talking about a different way of celebrating Christmas sometimes we find our selves innagurating the season with a nice, big, family conflict...this certainly isn't the goal! So, in the hope of making these conversations less abrasive, yet beneficial to everyone involved, here are a few tips to keep in mind as you begin.

1) Understand that these conversations are value-driven.

Meaning, it's not traditions or rituals that are at stake (the how), it's people's personal experiences that are connected to the meaning of Christmas. So when you start to question family holiday practices, understand that the practice is a reflection of someone's ideal, or memory, or hope. Be careful with the process of deconstructing their happy memories. So assess:

What do I care about as I evaluate our traditions? What do others value? Where do conflicts arise? What is it that we want? Does it matter if a tradition fits or doesn't fit with the deeper value?

2) Your way of celebrating doesn't need to be your extended family's way.

The modes of how we celebrate are less important than the relationships, conversations, and intentional involvement of Christ and his story. Sometimes we think we can fast-track a value conversation for the sake of making things easier, but this conversation with your families may take years of simple, gentle, incremental change.

Ask yourselves: If I had to pick between a control of the holidays or a kind voice that fosters meaningful conversations, which would I pick? In other words, do I want to win an argument, or be a representation of Jesus to others as we shape this season?

3) The path your family is on isn't where everyone else is at.

We all have different hopes, different backgrounds, different fears, and different things Christ wants to say about our lives. Year-to-year our own personal story may lend itself to different emphases: sacrificial giving, or the following year, some lavish purchasing.

Ask: What is Jesus doing in the life of my family and neighbors? Does this season call for frivolous giving? Should this year be a spot to pool our resources and care for a neighbor? What is Jesus asking of us?

4) Include children in your conversations.

Jesus has come and is coming! Advent should be a grand party! They'll keep the discussion fun-based! And, they'll get to participate in listening to the Spirit; let this be a moment that you model a conversation about what you all value as a family, with Jesus our King.

LAYOUT OF THE GUIDE:

This family guide is organized around the reading of the biblical Advent story, in conjunction with a fun Advent calendar. The activity section provides questions and experiential activities to explore what the story is inviting us to, as well as noticing things that may be pulling our attention away from Jesus. All of this is primarily designed to help foster your conversation as a family.

- The resources and ideas are organized around Advent Conspiracy, the way your church community is choosing to celebrate the season of Advent this year, based on the practices of **SPENDING LESS**, **GIVING MORE**, **LOVING ALL** and **WORSHIPPING FULLY**.

We **SPEND LESS** by resisting the cultural pressure to celebrate Advent through over spending and over consumption. Instead, we **GIVE MORE!** That is, we give relational, thoughtful, and meaningful gifts. We then take the money we saved and **LOVE ALL** by giving to those in true need. Each year various churches collect offerings and uses the funds both locally and globally to do things such as dig wells, provide medical care, give shelter and much more. Check with your local church leaders to find out if what your church's initiatives might be! In all of this, we strive to **WORSHIP FULLY** by keeping our focus on Jesus and participating with Him in what He came to do, bringing hope to a desperate world.

- Each family devotion was written with elementary kiddos in mind, so you'll need to translate things a bit depending on their development. If you have really young children, read these with friends or your spouse and dream about what Advent expectations might look like as your children grow.
- Lastly, be sure to pick up (or print off) a daily Advent Conspiracy calendar path, to inspire your kiddos in seeing ways to spend less, give more, love all and worship Christ fully each week. Have them read each activity, follow the instructions as a family, and mark it with a fun sticker to complete the day! Not every one of these ideas will work for your family, nor is the intention that you would do them all. Some are one-time experiences, some continue through the season!

SPEND LESS

READ: Isaiah 58:6-12

FOLLOWED BY:



Have you ever considered how rich you are? Sounds strange, since many of us are used to telling each other how tight things are. Did you know that if you have some band-aids, a little medicine, and purified water you are better off than most of the people in the world?

Kind of crazy, huh? If a family makes \$20,000 per year (which isn't much in America) you are richer than most of the world! You're in the richest 4% of the world's population! (Check out globalrichlist.com for more comparisons.)

Here are some examples of what money can do around the world:

- \$8 could buy 15 organic apples (or) 25 fruit trees for farmers in Honduras to sell fruit at their local market.
- \$30 could buy a video game (or) a medical kit for a village in Haiti.
- \$70 could buy a new mobile device (or) a new mobile health clinic to care for AIDS orphans in Uganda.
- \$2400 could buy a sweet HDTV (or) schooling for an entire generation of children in an Angolan village.

We often think that because we don't have the latest gaming system, the newest phones, the best sports gear, or the coolest clothes that we don't have much and that we're losing out on the good things in life. We might even think we aren't worth much because of what we don't have; maybe we'd be happier if we just had that one thing we're missing... So when Christmas rolls around every December, we're ready with our wish lists to get the bigger, or the better, or the best.

We've seen the shoppers pushing and shoving and vying for TV's (we may have even done some of this ourselves), but Christ showed up for a different purpose. To tell us a better story. His story has the possibility of changing what we care about, what we hope for, and what we imagine. Our King tells it lots of ways, but here's the simplicity of what he says:

- This life is very broken, and we all need saving. He is the savior.
- What many people hope in to rescue them, isn't truly strong enough.
- Enjoying God matters most, because it brings a real hope in the long run.
- We're here only a little while, so do the things that matter most in his Kingdom.
- How we really love God is expressed in caring for others, particularly those who are poor.

So the world values stuff: what we can get, what we can wear, and what we can eat. But Jesus tells us not to worry about all of this, but instead to consider how to honor others, show kindness to others, and steward the things he gives for the sake of others. If you've expected or hoped people would spend tons on presents for you in the past, or found yourself spending lots of money yourself in order to get the "better things", consider stewarding your resources in a way that cares for others (which might even be protecting your own family from the pain of debt!) Consider "spending less" as a family this Advent season!

ASK:

- What does this devotional reveal?
- What part did you like in it?
- What part is difficult to understand?
- What did it help you remember or notice about Jesus?
- What does all of this help you imagine for the people of God?
- What does the scripture describe? Read it again!

PRACTICE:

- **Spending freeze** – Take a week and "pause" from spending. Commit to stop buying anything that isn't necessary. (Yikes! This can be as difficult for parents as well as children.) Use all of the tension to help foster a conversation about our true needs as opposed to things we look to for comfort or rescue. Keep a list of everything your family "wants" to buy in a given week.
- How does it feel to be constricted in our spending? Why?
- How do we determine what is absolutely necessary?
- What does this experience reveal about our values?
- Create some of your own family guidelines here. Maybe spending would be allowed only in generosity towards others...

PRAY: Confess any frustrations in spending less and how it might affect your attitude as a family, and then give thanks for all of the blessings Christ HAS given you! Walk through each room of your home and express gratitude.



GIVE MORE

READ: Isaiah 9:6-7, Ephesians 1:3-10

FOLLOWED BY:



Giving is a tiny act of expressing the way we think or feel about someone. It says, “You matter to me!” It says, “I’ll give something away that’s important to me, in order to show that I care about you!” or “I’m thinking about you!” Have you ever given a gift wondering what you’ll get in return? Sometimes you might think, “I’ve put so much time, and effort, and money into this present...I hope I get something good too.” The reasons for how and what we give are really important; they express love, and they also give a little peek into what we hope for.

Similarly, the Father gave us the gift of his Son with a glimpse into his love and a few of his hopes: that we’ll be healed, that we’ll be a unified family, that we’ll see Jesus as the best King.

Imagine it. God the spinner of galaxies, the star-maker, the ant protector, the eagle feeder, the commander of angels gave himself to a very broken place, filled with hurting and angry people, in order to help us experience his loving kindness. He showed love through the language of sacrificial giving.

Now consider an all-too-familiar cultural Christmas. We have the tradition of buying an item (or gift-card) for a person because it’s tradition. Imagine if God were to give to this way: trinkets that we throw away once they wear out and break. Do you think he would have sacrificed his only Son for us?

The King says that the way we give is very important in his story. Listen to what he says: “The amount you give will be given back to you, but even more-so.” (Luke 6:38) Sounds awesome, yeah? But Jesus wasn’t talking about Xboxes or candy. He was talking about how the love and mercy we give away in this life will be a mirrored experience in the next life. In other words, how and what and why we give really, really matters to our King because our King first expressed it to us to show his goodness to others. He has given us so much! Ephesians chapter 1 tells us that he’s “lavished” or we could even say “heaped” his gifts on us, “every spiritual gift in the heavenly places” and he did all of this before we knew him, even when we’d rebel against him.

However, this doesn’t lead us into guilt, it directs us into joyful generosity. When we see his kindness, it grows kindness within us! Just like you’ve considered what it means to spend less as a family, think through what it also means to give more as you love others!

ASK:

- What actions would really, truly help someone?
- What could you sacrifice for the sake of someone?
- What do you know about the person's needs or preferences that could be expressed through a gift?
- How might you give up some of your time?
- What needs to change in you in order to simply be present with someone?
- Is there anyone that doesn't deserve your generosity? How might Christ relate to them?

PRACTICE:

- Throw an party – During the Advent season plan a dinner or a party as a family. Invite someone (or multiple people) over with the intention of showing generosity and practicing hospitality. Give your kids the primary role of helping plan the evening and make space for them to be the hosts. Let them enjoy the creativity of giving, as opposed to just receiving.

PRAY: Ask the Spirit to guide you in choosing who you invite to your party! Who is Jesus helping you see and love this Advent?



LOVE ALL

READ: Psalm 34, Isaiah 61



FOLLOWED BY:

As we experience the generosity of Christ it creates an opportunity to notice others. It inspires us to ask, “Who is lacking hope? Who is lonely? Who needs physical or emotional support?” Just like Jesus noticed us, we begin to notice others.

The story of Christ’s coming is often about people who went unnoticed. Mary the mother of Jesus was meek, but noticed by God; the shepherds were unimportant, but the angels revealed God’s plan to them. Jesus constantly served others that were the outcasts, or the unimportant,

such as: “the sinners”, children, women, the sick, people with disabilities, different ethnicities, and even caring for the rich Gentiles (non-Jews) who were facing the death of someone they dearly loved. What stories of his do you remember?

In his “Advent”, his coming, he invites each of us to care for others in tough moments. This is how he describes it in Matthew 25: ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.... When you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

It’s easy during the Christmas season to fixate on your immediate family or extended family, with all of the parties and events, but it’d be a bit funny if Christ had only come to be generous with Mary, Joseph, and his brothers. Instead, he moved beyond them to care for us, even sacrificing his immediate closeness with God the Father for our sake.

Now, we’ll still give our family presents and care for those closest to us, but there may be people you see in your everyday world that Jesus is asking you to care for. So ask Christ to help you see people who’ve gone unnoticed, and watch for the people that he may be noticing. Consider loving all!

ASK:

- Was there anything hard to understand in the story?
- How does it feel to remember that God himself notices you?
- Is anyone lonely or hurting at work or school? Who do you notice?
- How could you serve someone without them feeling embarrassed or ashamed of their circumstances?

PRACTICE:

Make a plan of action! Write down your plan as a family to serve someone new, pick a date, and follow through!

Here are a few ideas:

- Walk around your community and pray for your neighborhood ask:
- Who could we meet this season? Does anybody seem particularly lonely?
- Who could we make something for? Who could we bring baked goods to?
- What ways can we meet the needs we've seen? Any yard work that someone may be unable to do?
- Contact a local homeless shelter or food bank and ask how you could serve together as a family, even simply once.
- Ask some leaders in your church or neighborhood association if there's anyone in particular that you could help, whether visiting the elderly, bringing food to someone lonely, or making cards for someone sick.



WORSHIP FULLY

READ: Psalm 111



FOLLOWED BY:

Think of it, He has given us air to breathe right this minute, a heart that beats every second, jagged mountains, luminous oceans, shimmering rivers, breathing forests, still ponds, grassy fields, moss comfortably growing at the base of a telephone pole, a worm turning the compost over, a baby's bright eyes focusing on a reflection, coffee lathered in a mug, paint applied, paper cut, beads strung, clay pressed, wood sanded- all of it blanketed by God's beauty.

And Christ placed us in this immensity to explore it, describe it, steward it and respond to His beauty and His creativity. This Encounter with God draws us into an expression called worship. We relate back to God through our work and play, rest and pain, hurried chaos and silence. Categories of where and how and when are broken apart as we see more of Christ in all things and respond to Him in all things.

When the baby King arrived the angels responded in a massive outburst of joy in front of the shepherds, Magi came with their huge caravan from far away to bow down before him, and for 2,000 years people have celebrated his first coming at the same time that they waited for his return. This year it's your turn to Worship Fully.

You see, Christmas is about so much more than a fun day, good parties, and a few new things, it's about a King who came to show us the way home, fill us with his Spirit, and welcome us back into his family. So the hope is that we use all of the Christmas merriment to remind us of him, to remind us that we're going home to be with him, face-to-face. We won't carry our Christmas bags, or our cool new stuff with us, we'll carry the memories of how we participated in his adventures, how we watched for him, and how he revealed what he was up to in our lives and the lives of the neighbors we served along the way.

ASK:

- What do you enjoy most about Jesus the King?
- What do you wonder about him?
- How are you seeing him differently during this Advent season?

PRACTICE:

Use this little template below as a worship experience as a family! Dim the lights, and light some candles to calm everyone. Keep things fun! (Giggling is bound to happen with the little ones, so roll with what you can, and invite your kiddos into it.)

SAY:

ISAIAH 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Wonderful Counselor: let's thank Christ for how He is the best counselor.

- Draw a picture of something difficult that He is helping you with or that you're waiting on.

Mighty God: let's tell His story to each other.

- Write names of God or draw fun pictures of stories you remember that show His power.

Prince of "Setting everything Right": let's brainstorm some serving.

- Talk about what ways this season he has involved you in "setting things right" in the lives of people around you and thank him for it! What are some other things you'll be doing to help the poor or lonely?

Let's sing the song "Joy to the World" and remember what He's doing to bring peace.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

SAY: So Advent, and the final Christmas day

celebration is just a tiny, little start. A yearly moment that sets a pattern for what we care about, think about, and hope for. It reveals what our hearts are after, and reminds us what Jesus is after.

So may you worship Jesus more this season. May you care for others in new ways. May you spend less, give more, love all and worship fully!

