



Jim Rickard Bible Ministries
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The Twelve Days of Christmas

There may be one Christmas Carol that has always baffled you. What in the world do leaping lords, French hens, swimming swans, and especially the partridge who won't come out of the pear tree have to do with Christmas? Well, from 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. Those who instructed their children in Catholicism could be drawn and quartered. As such, the church went underground. To hide the important and illegal elements of their teaching, clerics composed poems that seemed silly to most people. But these verses were veiled works that taught the church's most important tenets. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is said to be one of these teaching tools, a memory aid regarding the main tenets of our faith. As such, someone during that era wrote this poem as a catechism for young Catholics.

It has two levels of meaning, the surface meaning plus a hidden meaning known only to members of their church. Each element in the poem has a code word for a religious reality, which the children could remember. These 12 items each represent something about the Bible and our faith.

But, before we address the 12 items, why are there 12 items in the first place. We have 12 items because they each are used to represent one of the 12 Days of Christmas. Ok, so where do we get the 12 Days of Christmas from?

The 12 Days of Christmas, also known as the Twelve Days of Christmastide, are days that represent various feasts the faithful Christians of medieval times celebrated regarding the Nativity, as some continue to do so today. These 12 Days of Christmas are thought to have originated in 567 A.D, at the Council of Tours, where they proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to the day before Epiphany, (the celebration of the Magi giving gifts to the babe Jesus), as the Twelve Days of Christmas Festival. That means it began on December 25th and ran through January 5th. They proclaimed these days as a sacred and festive season, which established the duty of Advent fasting in preparation for the feast. In this celebration, the "Octave," or 8th Day, is our New Year's Day, but it was also known as the Feast of the Circumcision, (the day Jesus was circumcised), which was also celebrated.

Because of this "Advent" fasting, in our current day, most people believe the Twelve Days of Christmas start on December 12th or 13th and run through Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

However, the original Twelve Days of Christmas ran from December 25th to January 5th, on the Julian Calendar, counting the first and last days. When the calendars were changed to the Gregorian calendar, this corresponded to January 7th to sunset on the 18th. Therefore, because of the difference in ancient and modern calendars, and the countdown to the time of Christ' birth/Advent, there are three different 12 Days of Christmas today.

- 1) December 13 – 25, Advent.
- 2) December 25 – January 5, original dates.
- 3) January 7 – 18, modern dates.

Nonetheless, even with the change in calendars from Julian to Gregorian, many stick with the original dates of December 25 – January 5 for this festival.

Originally, in both Eastern and Western European churches, the twelve days of Christmas meant attending daily church services, as these days were a time of rededication and renewal of faith. It was also a time when small, simple, and usually symbolic gifts of faith were given to children. Thus, in both public worship and coded poems, the twelve days were considered a holy period.

Further, some believe this festival was established to solve the administrative problem for the Roman Empire as it tried to coordinate the solar Julian calendar with the lunar calendars of its provinces in the east, and with others

who had various pagan festivals they celebrated. It is thought that some of the traditions associated with the 12 Days were adapted from the older pagan customs, including the Roman Saturnalia (*an ancient Roman festival and holiday in honor of the god Saturn, held on December 17th in the Julian calendar and later expanded with festivities until December 19th. By the 1st century BC, the celebration had been extended until December 23, for a total of seven days of festivities*). In addition, it is thought that later in English history, to combine the Germanic Yuletide celebration that was also a 12 Day festival, they incorporated some of its traditions. Scholars have connected the original celebrations of Yule to the “Wild Hunt, the god Odin, and the heathen Anglo-Saxon Mōdraniht, a.k.a., Mothers’ Night.”

Now, we do not know what day Jesus was actually born on. The Bible does not tell us. Some think in the Fall, others in later winter or early the Spring, and still others associate it with the Hannukah celebration, the Feast of Lights, as Jesus was the light of the world, **John 1:4-9; 8:12; 9:5**. It is very unlikely that Jesus was born on our December 25th. But if He was, as Hannukah’s first night was also December 25th this year, (2024), the 8th day would be January 1, the 8th day of the Hannukah celebration. Hanukkah is observed for eight nights and days, starting on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, which may occur at any time from November 28, to December 27, on the Gregorian calendar.

Regarding the 12th Day of the Twelve Days of Christmas, the evening of the last day is called the Twelfth Night or Epiphany Eve, were on the next morning being Epiphany, it is the day they celebrated the day the Magi came to worship Jesus. It also was celebrated to commemorate the Baptism of Jesus, and the wedding at Cana. As with the birth of Jesus, the Bible does not give us dates for any of these three events, but they were and are celebrated during this time, as they were actual Biblical accounts and important days of Jesus’ life and ministry.

So that is a brief review as to why there are “12 Days of Christmas.” Now, let us get back to the origin and meaning of the poem that became a song.

The best-known English version of this poem was first printed in “Mirth without Mischief,” a children’s book published in London around 1780. The work was attributed to Thomas Bewick. As for the song, a large number of different melodies have been associated with it, of which the best known is from a 1909 arrangement of a traditional folk melody by English composer Frederic Austin. Over the years some have made variations to the gifts given, but the ones we know today are based on the original poem.

As noted above, the 12 days in the song are the 12 Days beginning on Christmas Day, (December 25th), and counting down to the day before Epiphany (January 6). Twelfth Night is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the evening of January 5th, the day before Epiphany, which traditionally marks the end of Christmas celebrations.”

As for the meaning of gifts given in the song, we first note that the “**My true love**,” originally represented God in the Person of Jesus Christ, because “**God so loved the world He gave His only son**,” **John 3:16**. That giving of the Son of God first appeared with Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, which we celebrate on Christmas Day. The “to me,” are believers who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

The following 12 Gifts include:

Day 1: **The Partridge in a Pear Tree**, also represents Jesus Christ, because that bird is willing to sacrifice its life if necessary to protect its young by feigning injury to draw away predators.

Day 2: **Two Turtledoves**, were the Old and New Testaments. In this gift, the singer finds the complete story of Judeo-Christian faith and God’s plan for the world. The doves, which were also substitutionary sacrifices, are the Biblical roadmap that is available to everyone.

Day 3: **Three French Hens**, stood for faith, hope, and love. This gift hearkens back to **1 Corinthians 13**, the love

chapter written by the apostle Paul, as well as **1 Thes 1, 5**. In addition, they remind us of Jesus' statements in **Mat 23:37; Luke 13:34**, cf. **Psa 91:4**.

1 Cor 13:13, “**But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.**”

1 Thes 1:3, “**Constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.**”

1 Thes 5:8, “**But since we are of *the* day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.**”

Day 4: **The Four Calling Birds**, were the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four books that teach us of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Partridge in the Pear tree.

Day 5: **The Five Golden Rings**, recalled the Torah or Law, the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which describe man's fall into sin and the great love of God in sending a Savior.

Day 6: **The Six Geese A-Laying**, stood for the six days of creation, as each egg is a day in creation, a time when the world was “hatched” or formed by God.

Day 7: **Seven Swans A-Swimming**, represented the sevenfold gifts or ministries of the Holy Spirit according to Catholicism, as swans are one of the most beautiful and graceful creatures on earth, they would seem to be a perfect symbol for spiritual gifts that included: Prophecy, Serving, Teaching, Exhortation, Contribution, Leadership, and Mercy.

As these seven are gifts from the Holy Spirit, we also recognized the Seven ministries of the Holy Spirit as:

- 1) Common and Efficacious Grace.
- 2) Regeneration.
- 3) The Baptism of the Holy Spirit.
- 4) Indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
- 5) The sealing ministry of the Spirit - a signature guarantee.
- 6) The Filling of the Holy Spirit.
- 7) The distribution of spiritual gifts.

Day 8: **The Eight Maids A-Milking**, were the eight types of people found in the beatitudes of **Matthew 5:3-12**, who are blessed by God. As Christ came to save even the lowest of the low, this gift represents the ones who would receive His Word and accept His grace, and live it in their lives. Back in the day, being a “milkmaid” was about the worst jobs one could have in England during this time. As such, this code conveyed that Jesus cared as much about servants as He did those of royal blood. The eight who were “blessed” included:

Matthew 5:3-12,

- 1) ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
- 2) ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”
- 3) ⁵“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”
- 4) ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”
- 5) ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”
- 6) ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”
- 7) ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”
- 8) ¹⁰“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you

because of Me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Day 9: **Nine Ladies Dancing**, were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self Control, **Gal 5:22-23**.

Day 10: **The Ten Lords A-Leaping**, were the Ten Commandments. This is probably the easiest gift to understand. As lords were judges and in charge of the law during this time, and this code for the Ten Commandments was fairly straightforward to Catholics, as they are to all Christians today.

Day 11: **The Eleven Pipers Piping**, is somewhat of a trick question but has significance as it stood for the eleven faithful disciples. We typically think of the disciples and later Apostles as 12 men, but this reminded them that one did not believe, i.e., Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. Yet, the other 11 disciples would go on to become the Apostles of the Church and spread the gospel message, to which Jesus would later add Paul to their number to make them 12 once again. But this emphasizes the 11 faithful disciples spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Day 12: **The Twelve Drummers Drumming**, you would think represented the 12 apostles, but it had another meaning that was significant to the Catholic Church. It symbolized the twelve points of belief regarding Jesus Christ, (the Partridge in the Pear Tree,) in the Apostles' Creed.

Apostles' Creed

- 1) I believe in God the Father Almighty,
- 2) maker of heaven and earth:
- 3) and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord;
- 4) who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
- 5) born of the Virgin Mary,
- 6) suffered under Pontius Pilate,
- 7) was crucified, dead, and buried;
- 8) He descended into Hades;
- 9) the third day He rose again from the dead;
- 10) He ascended into heaven,
- 11) and sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty;
- 12) from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

The creed ends with: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.”

Over the years, fewer and fewer churches and families participated in the tradition of the 12 Days of Christmas, and it was all but lost. Yet, in the obscure poem that was later turned into a popular carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” lives on. And the 12 Days described are actually a wonderful overview of the Christian faith.

And remember, the “true love” mentioned in the song is not a sweetheart, but the code for God Himself, who authored the plan of salvation and gave His Son to fulfill that plan. Likewise, His Son is also God Himself, who took on humanity in hypostatic union, so that our sins could be paid for and all of mankind could receive salvation. Likewise, the person who receives the gifts represents anyone who has accepted Christ as the Son of God and as their personal Savior. And finally, each of the gifts portrays an important facet of the story of true faith.