

“Ho, Ho, Ho,” he said. “Make me some milk and cookies,” he demanded. “Don’t be naughty or I won’t bring you any presents,” he threatened. Who is this jolly fat man, and why do we have to put up with him every year? I am happy to tell you all – that as an adult and as a Christian – I am a strong believer in Santa Claus. I believe by focusing on his story I become a better human being. It wasn’t always this way. When I was in middle school I knew a kid who, despite being 13-years old, still believed in Santa Claus. I’m ashamed to tell you I made fun of him relentlessly and got other kids involved. But now I realize he was right. Santa Clause, or St. Nicholas, is real, and he has a lot to teach us about mercy and charity.



The historical St. Nicholas was born toward the end of the 200's in a city of modern-day Turkey. Life wasn't always easy. Both of his parents died when he was very young and he was raised by his uncle. His uncle taught him to read and write, eventually training him to be a bishop. Then Emperor Diocletian launched the biggest persecution against the church in history. St. Nicholas was put in prison for his faith. Nicholas didn't waste his time in the penitentiary, however, as he became known for sharing the gospel with the other inmates. After he was released his good deeds continued. Once during a famine, a ship full of grain headed for the emperor was anchored at Myra, where Nicholas lived. At considerable risk to himself, he convinced the sailors to unload part of the emperor's grain to help the poor and starving in the city. His most famous story concerns three girls he kept out of prostitution. A certain poor man had three daughters. At that time, if a father could not raise enough money for his daughter to bring a financial gift to her new husband at the start of the marriage, she would have to stay unmarried, and would most likely end up a prostitute. Nicholas couldn't stand the thought of this happening to these young girls, so he tossed three bags of money through their window and disappeared into the night. This story is the origin of gift-giving at Christmas time.

Santa Claus also had himself a bad temper. He was one of those guys who got all bent out of shape whenever he debated God and the Bible. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, Nicholas lost his cool and struck a heretic on his face. At a gathering of Christian bishops this was not exactly normal practice. Despite all his good deeds, this violent act marred his reputation throughout history. His bad temper may have also marred his face. In 2005, a team of scientists opened his tomb and photographed his remains. They determined he was 5'6" in height and had a broken nose. Using computer science, they were able to reconstruct what he looked like (see picture on right). His injury left his nose slightly crooked. We can't be sure, but since he hit somebody at the council, his broken nose might have come from his tendency to get into brawls.

What have we learned about this jolly fat man? I hope we have learned to not always believe the rumors we hear about people. Nicholas wasn't always jolly, and almost certainly wasn't fat. Santa Claus, as awesome as he was, didn't have any flying reindeer. And although a short man himself, there were no elves at his disposal. He was a saint, though. When supplies get short most people only think about themselves. Nicholas put himself at risk in order to feed a starving city. The world has always sexually victimized women. In our time, the modern slavery of sex trafficking is alive and well, and how often have you seen someone use alcohol or a bag of dope to take advantage of a woman? Nicholas could have been like that, but as a Christian he chose to be different. He sacrificed his wealth to keep three women out of prostitution. He gave us the tradition of gift-giving at Christmas. He suffered for his faith in the penitentiary, and worked hard to ensure the other inmates had an encounter with Jesus. And yes, he had a bad temper, and his broken nose might have been proof of that. But one of the saddest features of our world is the good performed by Christian people is often forgotten, down-played, or explained away. The world prefers to focus on our shortcomings, and all the times we didn't look like Jesus. When we talk about Santa Claus – or anyone for that matter – let us distance ourselves from this kind of lifeless negativity. St. Nick, like us, loved Jesus and worked hard to leave something of eternal value at the altar of Christ. St. Nick, like us, had his shortcomings, and on judgment day we will have no choice but to join him in throwing ourselves before the tender mercy of a loving God – and I trust His mercy will be enough. Therefore, I believe in Santa Claus and I accept him – both the good and the bad. If we should prove to demonstrate only one-tenth of his character and compassion this Christmas season, then we may gladly call ourselves “Christians.”

Merry Christmas to all of you from Michael, myself, and all the gang. We pray that God's love will carry you through this holiday season, and that He would make us all a little bit more like St. Nick.