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The Cast of Christmas | Part 2 | 12 Days of Christmas | Pastor Steve Wells | 12.13.2020
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The Twelve Days of Christmas - True Meaning Behind the Lyrics

The teachings of the Christian faith were outlawed in sixteenth-century England. Those who instructed their children in the faith could be punished. Thus, 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. By understanding the meaning the clerics chose the twelve days as wrapping for their poem, the full impact of the tradition of the twelve days of Christmas can be understood.

The 12 Days of Christmas - Christian Meaning

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . a partridge in a pear tree.

The partridge in a pear tree represents Jesus, the Son of God, whose birthday we celebrate on the first day of Christmas. Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge, the only bird that will die to protect its young.

On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . two turtledoves.

These twin birds represent the Old and New Testaments. So in this gift, the singer finds the complete story of Judeo-Christian faith and God's plan for the world. The doves are the biblical roadmap that is available to everyone.

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . three French hens.

These birds represent faith, hope, and love. This gift harkens back to 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter written by the apostle Paul.

On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . four calling birds.

One of the easiest facets of the song's code to figure out, these fowl are the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . five gold rings.

The gift of the rings represents the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah or the Pentateuch.

On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . six geese a-laying.

These lyrics can be traced back to the first story found in the Bible. Each egg is a day in creation, a time when the world was "hatched" or formed by God.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . seven swans a-swimming.

It would take someone quite familiar with the Bible to identify this gift. Hidden in the code are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion. As swans are one of the most beautiful and graceful creatures on earth, they would seem to be a perfect symbol for the spiritual gifts.

On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . eight maids a-milking.

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. Being a milkmaid was about the worst job one could have in England during this period; this code conveyed that Jesus cared as much about servants as he did those of royal blood. The eight who were blessed included the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

On the ninth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . nine ladies dancing.

These nine dancers were really the gifts known as the fruit of the Spirit. The fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . ten lords a-leaping.

This is probably the easiest gift to understand. As lords were judges and in charge of the law, this code for the Ten Commandments was fairly straightforward to Catholics.

On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . eleven pipers piping.

This is almost a trick question, as most think of the disciples in terms of a dozen. But when Judas betrayed Jesus and committed suicide, there were only eleven men who carried out the gospel message.

On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . . twelve drummers drumming.

The final gift is tied directly to the Catholic Church. The drummers are the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. 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."

So, just a silly song? On the surface maybe, but in reality, a refreshing reminder of the essential elements of Christian faith. The twelve days of Christmas may no longer be a widely recognized holiday tradition, but the days were an important bridge that connected persecuted believers of the past with the whole story of God's plan. In the complicated world of today, a trip back to the not-so-distant past when Christians celebrated the twelve days of Christmas would only enhance the meaning of Christmas for everyone.