



Charley came over to Tom and me and dared us: “If I switch toys, will you?” Charley was a star athlete and the most popular guy in school, so foolishly we accepted his dare.

Four large boxes, one for each of the classes, had been placed in the middle of our large California high school campus. The boxes were for the toys each class had been challenged to collect for our annual Christmas toy drive for needy children. The winning class earned points toward the “Class of the Year” competition. Anyone caught switching toys—taking a toy from one box and putting it in another—would cause his or her entire class to be disqualified from earning points.

Charley led the way, taking a toy from one box and blatantly tossing it in the senior class’s box. Tom and I tried to make our switches inconspicuously, but someone saw us and reported us to the principal. The next

morning we were summoned before the student council and confronted by the principal. Shamefaced, we slowly nodded when he asked if we had switched the toys.

Later that morning, an announcement went out over the public address system to the entire campus: “Due to the switching of toys by two members of the senior class, seniors are no longer eligible to earn points in the toy competition.” We had not been named, and we had hoped to remain anonymous. But news traveled fast among the 3,500 students. The students from other grades sarcastically complimented and thanked us, but we had definitely become unpopular with our fellow seniors.

After school, we dejectedly sat on Tom’s couch and discussed what we should do to try to turn the situation around. We put on our critical thinking caps for probably the first time in our lives. Finally we came up with

When Christmas Changed My Heart

BY WILLIAM J. CTIBOR
*Our efforts to save face
blessed us and others.*

We watched in amazement as the fire truck parked and children gathered from all directions.



a brilliant idea. Since the principal had invited the seniors to continue to bring toys to school, that was what we would do.

The last day of the toy drive coincided with the last day of school before Christmas break, which was three days away. Tom and I would go into the neighborhoods around our school and spend the next three nights collecting toys.

Going door to door for hours on end was very hard work. Families with children usually had a toy to give us. Elderly people usually had nothing for us. But two events caught us off guard.

One elderly gentleman, who said that his only son had been killed in the Korean War, asked us to wait a moment and left us standing at his front door. He soon came back and handed us \$100. "I've never seen you boys before," he said, "and for all I know you'll spend this money on yourselves, but my contribution is intended to be used as a memorial to my son."

We were speechless, which was unusual for us. We immediately headed for the Whittier Downs Mall, and 15 minutes later we were talking to the manager of a toy store, explaining what we were doing. Before we knew it, we had three very large bags of toys he sold us at a discount. Excited, we headed right back to the elderly man's house to show him we had done as he wished. He cried as he shook our hands.

The next evening, at another home, Tom and I were greeted by a much younger man who seemed taken aback when we explained what we were doing. He invited us in and then excused himself to go get his wife. After what seemed like a very long time, he came back with his wife and a large box of toys. His wife was crying.

The man introduced his wife to us and with great difficulty he softly said, "Thanks for being patient with us. I know you must feel ill at ease with the way we are behaving, so let me explain. A year and a half ago our three-year-old son passed away from leukemia. We would like to give you his toys. It's hard, but we feel it's the right thing to do."

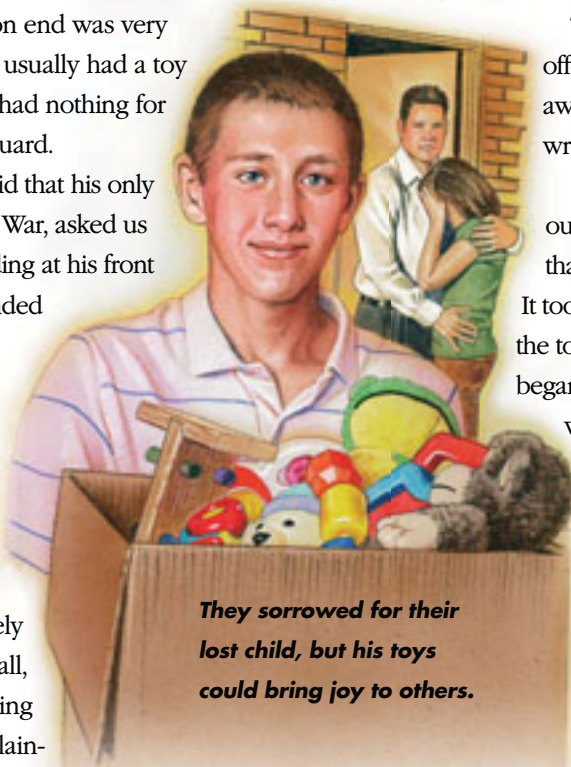
Tom and I were inclined to refuse their offer, but they were insistent. As we drove away, they stood on their porch, arms wrapped around each other, watching us.

On the third and final night, we found ourselves standing before a pile of toys that almost filled Tom's single-car garage. It took two trips with two cars to get all of the toys to school the next morning. We began long before dawn, and when we were through, the senior class toy collection box was perched atop a pile of toys that dwarfed the other classes' contributions. It still didn't qualify for points, but the senior class honor had been restored.

After all the excitement, by the time Christmas Eve arrived, Tom and I were once again sitting on his couch, intensely bored. I was about

to go home when Tom's father appeared wearing the most spectacular Santa costume I had ever seen. "How do I look, fellas?" he asked. Before we could overcome our astonishment and reply, we heard the deep rumble of a powerful diesel engine, and a brand new fire truck pulled up in front of the house. Covered with a net, a pile of beautifully wrapped presents filled the truck.

Tom's dad jumped in, climbed up to roost high above the mammoth vehicle, and the truck lurched forward. Suddenly, our day was no longer empty. I yelled at Tom,



They sorrowed for their lost child, but his toys could bring joy to others.



“Quick, let’s follow them.”

At first I thought they must be headed to the Whittier Downs Mall to play Santa for the lucky, privileged kids there. But with lights blazing and siren wailing, the fire truck turned off the main highway and into Old Pico, a four-block square of leaky wood-slat shacks occupied by migrant farm workers and their families. With a whoosh of air brakes the truck stopped and Tom’s dad climbed down. A host of excited children gathered from all directions, their parents watching from a distance as their little ones rejoiced over their gifts.

As the scene played out, many thoughts ran through my mind. My perception of Tom’s father took on a new aspect. Here was a man who possessed little himself yet was giving what he could. I saw thankful parents who must have been agonizing over providing basic necessities, much less Christmas presents, shedding tears of joy for their children. I considered for the first time how children must feel when Santa forgets them.

Frankly, until then I had been pretty full of myself. Our whole effort to gather the toys had been focused on restoring our social standing. But those experiences with the generosity of grieving parents, along with what I saw in Old Pico, began to soften my heart and turn my view outward. I realize now that it all helped prepare me to seriously consider and accept the gospel when I heard its message a few years later.

That evening when I asked Tom’s dad where the presents came from, he was puzzled. “You mean you don’t know?” he said. “They came from the toy drive at your school.” ■