

WITH CHILD BY THE HOLY SPIRIT
Matthew 1:18-25 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

When we think of Joseph, the stepfather of our Lord Jesus, it makes me remember Joseph in the Old Testament who was thrown into a pit and sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Some of the last words of Joseph to his brothers that are recorded in Scripture came after Jacob, their father died, and his brothers, fulfilling God's dream to Joseph, came and bowed before him asking afresh for forgiveness, and saying, "We are your servants." Joseph's answer to them, found in Genesis 50:20 was, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Overcoming trials can be overwhelming at times. Anne Sullivan grew up in poverty and pain. Two of her siblings died in infancy. At five, an eye disease left Anne partially blind and unable to read or write. When Anne was eight, her mother died from tuberculosis. Shortly after, her abusive father abandoned his three surviving children. The youngest was sent to live with relatives, but Anne and her brother Jimmie went to Tewksbury Almshouse in Massachusetts, as a dilapidated, overcrowded poor house. A few months later Jimmie died. At age fourteen, Anne's circumstances brightened. She was sent to a school for the blind, where she underwent surgery to improve her vision. It was successful, and Anne learned to read and write. Though she struggled to fit in, she excelled academically and graduated as valedictorian. Today, many of us remember Anne Sullivan as Helen Keller's teacher and companion. Through effort, patience, and love, Anne taught blind and deaf Helen to speak, read Braille, and graduate from college. Joseph overcame too.

Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband, faced a trial of being given all the facts, but misunderstanding the facts he was given. Joseph, the son of Jacob, of Nazareth in Galilee, David's descendent was betrothed to Mary, a virgin in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. Joseph and Mary had not been one as man and wife, Matthew 1:18 tells us, Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, being a righteous man, loving Mary and not wanting to disgrace her by divorce, desired to divorce her secretly. Amazingly, betrothal was so binding, only divorce could dissolve it as was true of marriage. Why was Joseph planning a secret divorce of Mary? His reason was because he misunderstood the facts. He supposed Mary's pregnancy was the result of her sin and unfaithfulness to him. He as yet did not know or fully believe or understand that this child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. "With child from the Holy Spirit"—isn't that a hard pill to swallow?

Today, the Lord has laid on my heart three responses we all have at times to God's will, responses that are mirrored in the life of Joseph? As we look at them, two of Joseph's responses were wrong, disobedient to God's plan. Ponder with me the three responses of this man of God. Joseph was a sensitive, righteous, and obedient man. Notice these three responses he had towards Mary expecting the Baby Jesus. Notice how God was not through leading Joseph until he left his first two responses behind to respond God's way. What are these three responses we all can give to God's will that are mirrored in the life of Joseph?

WE CAN BE SENSITIVE TO OTHERS, BUT WRONG, BECAUSE WE DON'T UNDERSTAND OUR PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN. (I.) Notice the

wording of Matthew 1:18, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Matthew was not telling us that Mary tried to conceal her pregnancy. Yet, the narrative is marked with great delicacy. We know from Luke 1:39-45 that Mary got the message from Gabriel announcing the virgin birth of Christ and that she would be the mother of Jesus. Immediately, Mary made haste to the hill country where Elizabeth was 6 months along in her miraculous expectancy of John the Baptist. (Luke 1: 39.) Mary actually stayed three months with Elizabeth until the birth of John the Baptist.

When Mary could tell she was expecting, three months later, she returned home to Nazareth. She surely told Joseph, or he must have asked her once again why she left for the hill country to Elizabeth's house. I don't believe Mary spared any of the details. Now it was out. Matthew tells us in Matthew 1:18 that Mary "was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Do you think Joseph loved Mary? Oh yes, he did! Do you think this fact of Mary expecting and her story of the angel Gabriel troubled him? He loved her I am sure, but believing this story from Mary was apparently too much for Joseph.

The Greek word for found to be with child is **heurisko**. This word means simply to become known. Mary's pregnancy was known now and becoming known as she made the fact of her pregnancy known to others including her betrothed. Joseph's response to Mary, verse 19, was compassionate and sensitive, and merciful, for legally, Joseph was the injured party in this matter. As a righteous man, Joseph's only recourse was to divorce Mary and break the betrothal. The law of Moses made death the normal result of Mary's condition. In Leviticus 20:10, God's law states, "If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." But you say, "they weren't married, just engaged, betrothed, espoused." Turn to Deuteronomy 22:23-27 which declares, "If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst. "But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help, there was no one to rescue her."

Do you see the compassion and sensitivity of Joseph? What a man he was, not willing to have Mary stoned, but only to divorce her secretly. Joseph did not wish to make Mary a public disgrace. Give Joseph an A+ for sensitivity and compassion and mercy, but his plan nevertheless was wrong. Surely, we could say Joseph was

showing love, but he still was wrong. Why? In Joseph's sensitivity, he never knew the place he was to play in God's plan. We all need to remember at this Christmas time that love, compassion, mercy, and sensitivity are wonderful, but they are not a worthy substitute for knowing and finding God's place for us in His plan.

Logically, culturally, and wisely, Joseph felt he had no place now in the life of Mary. Her child could never be his child, only a stepson. He knew, as Matthew 1:18 makes clear, that he and Mary had not come maritally together.

It is so important that we never substitute sensitivity and compassion and love and mercy for God's will when God has a place for us that we can't understand. I remember some years ago speaking with a wonderful woman whose children and grandchildren were called to serve God overseas on the mission field. Few mothers and grandmothers have ever had more love and compassion and sensitivity for their children and grandchildren. But this woman was fighting for her right and her place to stop her children and her grandchildren from going to this country where missionaries have been martyred. It was hard for me to speak with her because her sensitivity to their possible harm obscured God's call that they had to the mission field. This woman's call was to rejoice for them. Inside, I cried for her, because she was sensitive but so wrong, not understanding God's call of them to the ministry and missions, and not understanding God's call to affirm their call and to rejoice.

Before I go to the next response of Joseph, let me tell you all as parents. Hold loosely to your children when they are grown. Rejoice and support your children in God's call in their lives, no matter if you believe their way may be long, hard, difficult, or filled with trials. Sensitivity and love can stand in the way of God's call, and in the end, not be love, sensitivity, compassion, or mercy at all. They can become sin as they stand in the way of God using our children to bring many to Christ. Let's look at a second response to God's will, mirrored in the life of Joseph.

WE CAN BE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MAIN, BUT WRONG IN PARTICULARS, BECAUSE WE ARE AFRAID OF GOD'S WILL. (II.)

Look at verse 19, 20, "And her husband, Joseph, being a just man, and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This Greek word for considered is **entheumeomai**. It means to be agitated, in foment, stirred up, aroused, ruffled, perturbed, or shaken and talking it out in your heart and mind. This righteous man was considering divorce, yet wanting to stay with Mary, and it put him in a quandary of fear. Don't doubt Joseph being righteous, but he was also wrong in being ready to divorce Mary because he was afraid, but afraid of what? Mary didn't conceal her story. She told it all. Joseph wanted to believe her, but in this particular, could it be Mary was covering up a sin and shame or choosing to forget the truth? The Gabriel story was a great story he must have heard along with the words of Elizabeth that Mary told him about, no doubt. So, in considering if and when to put Mary away privately—God saw this righteous man making a wrong decision. And what did God do?

God brought light to Joseph in the particulars of Mary's conceiving of this child. The angel God sent said in essence, "Don't consider a moment longer." Do not fear to take her as your wife, for that which is conceived in her, (that which is forming within her) is conceived of the Holy Spirit." Look at verse 21. "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He who will save His people from their sins." Notice Matthew adds—in verses 22,23, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: Isaiah 7:14) "Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which means, "God with us."

Don't miss the point. This Christmas, God doesn't want us only to be righteous in the main, but wrong in the particulars. No! God wants every bit of what we think, say, do, act, and follow to be righteous in the main and in all the particulars. When Isaiah gave his prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, getting the prophecy correct in general was not enough. It had to be a virgin—Hebrew **almah**—a maiden who had never shared intimacy with a man. Do the particulars matter with God? Oh, they do. They mean more than we want to admit. This Christmas don't settle for being righteous in the main. What specific things is God asking you to do in particular that are stretching you and challenging you and making you afraid? Hear God's Christmas message, "Do not be afraid." Stop the inner debate. Obey the Lord in the particular matters He has brought before you. Don't be afraid of God's will. There remains one last response to God's will that is here mirrored in the life of Joseph.

WE CAN BE OBEDIENT AND RIGHT AND HEROIC, BECAUSE WE CHOOSE TO FOLLOW GOD'S COMMAND FULLY. (III.)

The final response of Joseph is heroic. Listen to Matthew 1:24,25. "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he (Joseph) called His name Jesus." What husband would do what Joseph did? A sensitive man who dropped his wrong conclusions, a righteous man in the main, who found it also so important to be righteous in the particulars, and an obedient man who became heroic by choosing to follow God's command. Think of it this Christmas! Joseph and Mary lived in the same home now married, man and wife, but Mary's virginity remained intact, unimpaired until after she became a mother, the mother of our Lord. Joseph gets passed over too often. He is one of the great heroes in the story of Christmas. But the greatest reason he is a hero for God is simple. He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife. What was it that Joseph refused to do?

He refused to trump God's plan with his own plan that seemed wiser or more wonderful or more worthy of consideration. How many of you have ever played Rook? Usually, the Rook card is the highest card. Except for the Rook, worth 20 points, the highest card you can count for points is a 1, (15 points) then a 14 and a 10—both which count 10 points. But if the Rook has been played, and you have a Black, red or green 1 or 14, a simple lowly yellow 2 can take any of them if yellow happens to be trump. Think with me. As we consider the virgin birth, I ask you, "Why do liberals and unbelievers fight the doctrine of the virgin birth? You may say, 'What's a liberal? A liberal defines people who allow human ideas to trump

the Word of God.” Did you know that evangelicals like you and me can do the same? A person can say, “God is leading me, or He has called me to be something or to do something that is forbidden in God’s Word. Perhaps God has called you to tithe or to serve as an elder or to be a Sunday School teacher. How do we trump God and depart from the company of Joseph? It goes like this, and it starts with a little qualifying word “but.” I know God’s word tells us about tithing, **but** that is Old Testament. Anyway, my salary isn’t high enough to tithe. Trump! Yes, it is a good idea to serve as a Sunday School teacher or as an elder, **but** Trump!—“I am too busy on my job to do it.” I’ll wait til’ I get a job that fits serving in the church. Trump. “Yes, it’s good to be a missionary, **but** I can’t be sure I heard from God.” Trump! God can use me much better in other roles. Trump!

Joseph refused to trump God’s command/call. He could have said, “Okay, Lord, I hear what you say, **but** I need to protect my own reputation. I will take Mary after the birth of Jesus.” No, God wanted His own precious Son coming into a home with both a mommy and daddy who were married. Joseph could have said, “Lord, your idea is good, **but** give me a sign.” No, God would have quoted His Word in Isaiah 7:14, “Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, “God with us.” Joseph could have said, “I really am touched by the job you have for me to be Mary’s husband and Jesus’ stepdad, **but** that’s not my place, Lord. You are the Father. You are to fill this role, not me.” Thank God Joseph was obedient, right and heroic, because he chose to follow God’s command. He was willing to be an obedient substitute for the Father.

Are we willing to find God’s place this Christmas, even if it doesn’t seem or feel right and even if it does seem that another plan would be more sensitive? Are we willing to seek being righteous not only in the main, but in particulars, not being afraid of God’s will? Are we willing to be obedient and right and heroic by choosing to follow God’s commands? Let’s bow in prayer. Amen.