

A RIGHTEOUS MAN

Matthew 1:18-25 • December 15, 2019

Let's turn to Matthew 1 to read those words that are so familiar to us.

JOSEPH AND MARY

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 1:18, ESV)

When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together. Betrothal describes the first stage of marriage. A betrothed couple were legally husband and wife; the marriage feast that took place later didn't change the covenant in the least. The second stage of marriage was a public feast celebrating the marriage, and the physical consummation of the marriage by the couple. Betrothal was not at all like engagement is in our culture. A betrothed person who committed sexual sin was guilty of adultery. According to the rabbis, if a betrothed couple simply started living together without a marriage feast, it was not a violation of the Law, although it was not the acceptable way of entering into marriage. If a betrothed couple were intimate and the woman became pregnant, their child was legitimate; they had done nothing more than skip the wedding feast. It's an important part of the birth of Jesus because it tells us that Joseph and Mary were husband and wife, but they had not begun to be physically intimate, and so provides evidence that Mary was a virgin.

She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Matthew probably wrote his Gospel around 50 A.D., a couple of decades into the life of the church. Everyone knew that Jesus had been born of a virgin; this wasn't new information. So Matthew acknowledges what everyone knows: Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by the Spirit of God. He won't allow the slightest doubt about Mary's purity. Neither she nor Joseph were sinless, but they were both righteous.

THE HEART OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN

19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19, ESV)

“**Just**” means **righteous**, being right before God. Righteousness is most often taken to describe behavior. It is true that part of righteousness is upholding the customs and norms that make for a well-ordered, civilized society. But true righteousness is a matter of the heart, even more than outward behavior.

The kings in Jesus’ genealogy were all graded according to their righteousness; whether they did what was right or evil in the sight of the Lord. Later on we see that John the Baptist baptized people in keeping with repentance, for the sake of true righteousness. Jesus came to John to be baptized, to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus was driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, proving Himself righteous by the most rigorous testing. The Sermon On The Mount is a depiction of true righteousness, as compared to the self-righteous traditions of the Pharisees. Jesus’ words and actions throughout the Gospel are truly righteous. In Matthew 23 Jesus utterly destroys the Pharisees’ pretense of righteousness. Final judgment is shown to be separating the righteous from the unrighteous, not merely on the basis of sinful acts, but also of a sinful heart (Matthew 7:21-23). True righteousness is a matter of the heart first and foremost, and only then a matter of behavior. True righteousness is as concerned with the spirit of the Law as the letter of the Law.

We see this in Joseph.

And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. The evidence of Joseph’s righteousness is *seen* in his intention to divorce Mary quietly, privately. Nazareth is thought to have had a population of 200-500 when these events took place. Small town scandals are ugly things. Joseph was a righteous man, which meant that he lived according to both the letter and the spirit of the Law of God. He learned of Mary’s pregnancy, and did not believe her story. He was convinced that she had committed adultery. The Law permitted divorce in such cases, but required that a certificate of divorce be given to the woman explaining why the divorce had taken place. That certificate had to be given to her in front of at least two witnesses.

Joseph was caught in a dilemma. He was unwilling to keep Mary as his wife, and he was unwilling to put her to shame. He agonized over these things. He thought deeply, and resolved, and considered. I've seen marriages where the husband or wife was so ready for a divorce that when they found a reason, sometimes a very minor reason, they acted as quickly as they could. That's not what Joseph does. He restrained himself from acting on emotion, and gave himself time.

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

20 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. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21, ESV)

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Joseph fell asleep in the middle of his deliberations. He hadn't yet reached a final decision; he was still contemplating what he should do. And the Lord sent him an angel with a message.

Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife. The angel did not speak to Joseph as a carpenter, but as a king. David had lived 1,000 years before, so he might have had thousands of descendants. But there were very few in the royal line, connected to David through every single king of Judah. Joseph may have been the only man in Israel who could be called the rightful heir to David's throne. And that is how the angel addresses him: "You are descended from kings, you would be the king today if the throne was restored to David's line, so it's time to act like a king."

That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Mary had told the truth when she said that the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

MARY'S STORY

I think it's certain that she told Joseph what had happened to her:

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. **36** And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God."

38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26–38, ESV)

So, Mary is not an adulteress after all; to the contrary, she was as righteous as Joseph, and found favor with God. Joseph was not to divorce Mary, but to take her into his home as his wife. That brings an end to the immediate turmoil, but why has all this happened?

The angel told Joseph, **she shall bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.** The reason for this miraculous conception is God's plan to save sinners for His own eternal glory.

This is a plan that went back before David, before Moses, before Abraham, before Adam, to before Creation itself. That plan has come to rest in a tiny, unborn child in the womb of a young godly woman who was betrothed to a righteous man. And that man, by God's design, was the rightful heir to the throne of David, and so this adopted son would become the legal heir of David's throne. (Luke's genealogy shows that through Mary Jesus was David's biological heir).

We know, of course, that the baby will grow, become a man, live a sinless life, prove His identity through His teaching and works, die on the cross as a substitute for His people, rise from the dead in victory over sin and death, and ascend to heaven, where He continues even now to intercede for His people, as He prepares to return and bring about the fulness of the Kingdom of God.

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: **23** "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23, ESV)

Matthew paused his narrative to tell us that none of this was surprising. 700 years before Jesus was born the Lord spoke a prophecy through Isaiah: **a virgin would conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.** Matthew helpfully points out that Immanuel means God-With-Us. The Lord didn't say when this would happen, or who the virgin would be, or how the practical aspects of it would come to pass. But He did tell Israel seven centuries before the birth of Christ that the Messiah would be conceived and born in this manner. So this was not coincidence. Neither is it that Mary fooled around and got pregnant, and made up a story, and Joseph had a weird dream.

God watched over every single moment of history, controlling every outcome, and governing every day by His sovereign will. Look back through every aspect of this passage; every fact that you see – Joseph and Mary were betrothed but not yet intimate; Joseph was a truly righteous man; Joseph fell asleep before finalizing his decision – was under God’s control. There was nothing accidental about Jesus’ conception, birth, or even a single moment of His life and ministry. The same is true of us, by the way; our lives are not accidents or random happenings.

THE ACTIONS OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN

24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24–25, ESV)

In Matthew 1:19 we saw the heart of the righteous man. Joseph was as faithful to the spirit of the Law as to the letter of the Law, and he gave himself to deep, serious thought and contemplation as to how he should respond to the news of Mary’s pregnancy.

Now we see the actions of a righteous man. Now that Joseph knows what the Lord commands him to do, what does he do? He immediately obeys. He took Mary as his wife, bringing her into his house. I think he probably did it that very day.

Can I speculate for a moment? Joseph went to Mary’s home, where the family was still in shock. He stepped into the doorway, and they all looked at him. They looked at his hands; they were empty, no certificate of divorce. They looked behind him; no witnesses. He and Mary looked at one another, silent. Then he nodded his head, and said, “Yes, I know.” He held out his hands to her, and embraced her. She gathered her few possessions, and then Joseph walked his bride to his home, as the people of Nazareth stopped and stared. No wedding feast! No celebration! What was going on? Joseph brought Mary into his home, but they were not intimate until after Jesus had been born. The heart of the righteous man continued to govern his actions.

BRINGING IT HOME

Let's think about what we've seen here.

First: God Keeps His Promises. We see the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Savior. He sent His own Son, not to merely seem like a human being, but to be conceived as a human being, grow in the womb, be born, live, and die as a human being. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus Christ has two natures. He is eternally and fully God. And since His incarnation, He remains fully human. His human body and nature did not remain in the grave; He was physically raised from the dead in glory.

The Lord continues to keep His promises. Have you trusted in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation, and been born again? Then you have God's promise that He will never forsake you, never abandon you, never cast you out. He saved you knowing exactly what your life would be like, and He never ceases His work in you. The angel said to Joseph, Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The Scripture says to us, Do not be afraid to trust Jesus alone for salvation and eternal life. He is the perfect and faithful Savior.

Second: Don't Make Joseph Your Example. Joseph was a righteous man, and still a sinner in need of a Savior. Joseph was a remarkable man, but still facing judgment. Don't think you can simply imitate him and avoid the wrath of God. Just like Joseph, you need a Savior who can change your heart.

Third: We have a Savior. Remember, true righteousness begins in the heart, not the actions. Joseph was a righteous man, made that way by the Spirit of God through faith. Like Abraham, Joseph believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. His faith looked forward to the Savior to come – the Savior growing in Mary's womb, in fact – just as our faith looks back to the Savior who has come. Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing!