

Family Ties: Joseph, Jesus' Step-Dad, a Real Man Matt. 1:18-25 12/12/04

So far this Advent season we've looked at Jesus' unusual genealogy and at his strange cousin, John the Baptist. This week we move on to look at Joseph, Jesus' step-father. Have you ever wondered about him? What kind of man did God choose to raise his Son? This is the person who would serve as his model for what it meant to be a man. This is the man from whom Jesus would learn about love, life, and God. What kind of a man was he? Well, we don't know a great deal about him, because he is only mentioned in a few verses of Scripture. But listen as I read from Matt. 1:18-25 for what we can learn about this man, Joseph.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,* ²⁵*but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;** *and he named him Jesus.*

At the time of Jesus' birth, Joseph was likely around 20 years of age, the common age of marriage for a young Jewish man. Mary was probably closer to 14 or 15. They were betrothed. This was more serious and binding than modern engagement. Marriages were usually arranged by parents in ancient Israel, often when the children were young. About a year before the marriage was to take place, the couple had the opportunity to object to their parents' choice of a partner. If there was no objection, they were betrothed for one year. Betrothal was regarded as so binding that it actually required a divorce to end it. If one of the betrothed died, the other was regarded as a widow or widower. But even during betrothal, the couple rarely had contact with one another. It was a little like life in conservative Arab countries or in rural India today.

But there was a complication to this betrothal. Mary was found to be pregnant. This was a catastrophic development. So strong was the prohibition against sex outside of marriage in those days, that the offender could be put to death! Even if the law were not imposed (and it usually

wasn't), Mary's pregnancy would have brought great shame to her family, for they were responsible for raising this apparently morally loose woman. It would have brought great shame to Joseph's family- after all, they picked Mary for their son! It also brought great shame to Joseph. Others would assume the child was his. Since he knew it was not, he certainly would have felt betrayed and shamed. I think it is hard for 21st century Americans to understand the full horror of this situation, but it was truly terrible.

Jewish law required a divorce in cases like this. And verse 19 tells us that Joseph was a righteous man and that he planned to follow the law. The Greek word used for "righteous" here means Joseph was someone who was just and upright. He was a person who did the right thing. But Joseph's righteousness was tempered by compassion. Even though he had been deeply wounded by her actions, he did not wish to publicly humiliate Mary, or expose her to the judgment of others, so he sought to quietly divorce her. This was a remarkable response for a young man who felt wronged like this. His natural impulse would have been revenge, to make her hurt the way she had hurt him. But instead, he chose a more merciful response. John Maxwell once said, "Talent is a gift; Character is a choice." Joseph was choosing character here!

And he not chose only compassion and righteousness, but also self-control, a virtue that is sadly lacking in many parts of our culture.

When I think of self-control I think of an incident which happened a number of years ago. An associate pastor at my former church was preaching a sermon on hope in the midst of difficulty. She would point out a difficulty that we humans experience, followed by the phrase “but God” and then tell us about the good news of God’s power and love for us in the midst the difficult circumstance. For example, “We may feel like no one understands us, but God took on human flesh that first Christmas so he can understand us exactly.” You get the idea. She emphasized this phrase, “but, God” and although I’m sure it seemed like a good idea to her at the time, she made the unfortunate choice of referring to this truth as “God’s ‘but.’” In fact, there were several times when she spoke rather emphatically about “God’s ‘but.’”

Seated near the front of the sanctuary was her 13 year-old son, Joel. Seated next to Joel was his best friend, my 13 year-old son, Stephen. For some reason, they thought a sermon about “God’s but” was humorous. I know this because every time she mentioned “God’s but” I could see their little shoulders convulsing as they valiantly tried to maintain proper behavior in worship by not laughing out loud. After the closing hymn and benediction, they raced down the isle and exploded with gales of laughter in the narthex, as did several adults!

I was actually kind of proud of my son that morning. He was

exercising the virtue of self-control, although it almost killed him! How are you doing at exercising self-control? During the holidays, it requires self-control not to spend more than we can afford or to avoid drinking too much at Christmas parties. It always requires self-control not to speak our mind when our words would be hurtful to another. It requires self-control to remain sexually pure outside of marriage and sexually faithful within it. How are you doing at exercising self-control?

Back to Joseph. God intervened with Joseph, speaking to him through a dream. God explained the origin of the child and his future mission. And God instructed Joseph to forget about divorcing Mary. He was to take her as his wife. And then he was to name the child, Jesus—"Yeshua," similar to the Hebrew word, "Yoshua" which means "the Lord saves."

So what did Joseph do? *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus*" (Matt. 1:24,25)

Here we find more insight into Joseph's character. We've already seen his compassionate righteousness and his self-control. Now we see obedience. We don't like to talk much about obedience today. The word kind of grates on us. We Americans value self-determination, our ability

and right to make our own choices. We don't like anyone, including our families, our government, or even our church telling us what to do. We Americans are free to do what we want, aren't we? Well, yes and no. Legally, we're free to do pretty much what we want, unless it harms another person. But spiritually, we do so at great risk.

You see, we are created beings. That means we're designed to function best in certain ways. God has graciously revealed the basic operating instructions for human beings to us in the Bible. When we follow God's ways, when we obey him, we are simply living within our design. When we stray from God's ways, we are living outside of our design, and harm may well come to us or others.

It's a lot like a train. A train is free to roll along at great speeds, hauling hundreds of tons of freight or passengers over long distances...as long as it stays on the track! The minute it leaves the track, it loses its freedom and great harm is likely to result. At a minimum, it is no longer free to travel!

God's commandments are like those tracks. We can only function well as long as we stay on them. When we deviate from them, catastrophe often results. When we get drunk or high we may say or do things we later regret- hurtful, destructive things we would never have said if our minds were clear. When we refuse to forgive another person, that inner hurt turns

into bitterness and over time we become a bitter person. When we neglect those who are poor or in need, in time we become calloused to the needs of others. On the other hand, when we obey God, when we acknowledge God's rightful authority over our lives, God uses our obedient decisions to shape our character to conform us to the way we were created to be. And also to carry out the work God has for us to do.

Joseph was a man of character who understood the importance of obedience. So, trusting in the Lord, he simply did what he had been told to do. He took Mary as his wife, and he named the child Jesus. How are you doing with obedience?

The final thing I notice about Joseph's character is his self-sacrifice. Obeying God was costly to Joseph. It cost him his reputation. Since he did not divorce Mary, everyone would have assumed that the child was his. It also cost him his chance for a normal, quiet life in his hometown of Nazareth. Instead, he ended up on the run in the foreign land of Egypt in order to protect Jesus from Herod. Later he would return to Nazareth, I'm sure aware of the whispers of others behind his back.

Dawn Hochsprung was the well-liked principal of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Two days ago, Dawn sacrificed her life as she lunged at the gunman in her school in an attempt to protect her students. We'll never know how many lives her heroic act

may have saved. She exhibited the virtue of self-sacrifice in a terrible crisis.

I thank God that few of us are called to risk death as we sacrifice to help others. But we are called to make other sacrifices. For example, all of us are called to sacrifice our time. Are you sacrificing time you could be spending on yourself to, say, serve needy people in our community? To teach children in Sunday School or help with the nursery during worship? To rehearse and sing in the choir? To serve on a committee? To go on a mission project? To tutor children? To feed the hungry at the soup kitchen? To volunteer to help with the homeless shelter? To help with our youth group? To visit someone who can't get out much? Joseph was willing to sacrifice a lot in order to carry out God's will. How are you doing with self-sacrifice?

It seems to me that Joseph is often given short shrift during this season, but he played an essential role in Jesus' life. Women who bore children out of wedlock had no means of supporting themselves in those days. Abandoned by family and friends, they often were driven to prostitution just to survive. Joseph saved Mary and Jesus from that awful plight. And don't forget that it was Joseph who led Jesus and Mary to safety during Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem.

Joseph was chosen by God to raise his Son, Jesus. I think it was

because he was a man of character- righteous, compassionate, self-controlled, obedient, and self-sacrificing. Pray that God will give you that kind of character. I suspect that's the kind of person you would really like to be! And then be ready to step up and take the practical opportunities that God will bring to you to live out those character traits.