



Be Not Afraid of the Loss of Reputation

Advent Series #4

Matthew 1:18-25

David Sunday

December 25, 2016

It is so sweet to ponder this miracle of miracles, the greatest mystery of all, God becoming a Man for us and for our salvation. Matthew chapter one tells us the story of the birth of Jesus, focusing on Joseph.

This week I've been thinking about the queen of England. I have a fond admiration and fascination for her. I was a little saddened to hear that her annual Christmas tradition of going to Sandringham in Scotland was delayed because she and Prince Philip are in ill health. One of the things I've started doing, which was inspired by Ross Stern, is to listen to her annual Christmas messages. It's remarkable to hear her Christ-centeredness, how explicit she is about the meaning of Christmas. She is not ashamed of the gospel in her messages.

Another thing I admire about her is her marriage. She and Prince Philip celebrated their 69th wedding anniversary in November. She is 90 years old, he is 95, and they continue to be active. She was scaling back—dropping 80-some of her charities—but she has 500 or so that she manages. They are very devoted to their duties and from all appearances, and from what people who know them say, they've cultivated a beautiful marriage partnership.

I don't know if you've seen the recent series on Netflix called "The Crown." Kate and I watched all of Season One. It tells the fascinating story of Queen Elizabeth during her early years. When she married Prince Philip she was not expecting to be queen as soon as she was, but her father died when she was only four years into her marriage. She assumed the throne in February 1952.

One of the things I found most illuminating in this documentary/drama was watching Prince Philip having to adjust to living in the shadow of his wife, the queen. He had to give up his name, and his children had to take their mother's royal name. He had to give up his job—everything he had hoped for his future. He had to give up his headship in his marriage. The film powerfully depicts the day of the queen's coronation, and the first person who had to kneel before

her after she was crowned was her own husband, who pledged his fealty—his loyalty and commitment to serving her as his queen. The series described the struggle that must have been in this man’s heart as he relinquished his own dreams for the future and moved into his wife’s shadow.

It reminds me of a simple adage I first heard back in the 1990s as I was starting out as a pastor under someone else: “It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well.” That captured my thinking. It takes grace to be second, to live in the shadow, to not be up front.

This was Joseph’s situation. He is one of the most overlooked characters in the Nativity scene. He was the earthly legal father of our Lord Jesus, but he’s not His biological father. You may notice that very few of our Christmas songs sing of Joseph. We sing a lot about Mary, but I can only think of one line, and it’s not even in all the hymnals, about “Mary, Joseph, lend your aid.” I don’t think there’s much about him in our Christmas songs.

I also thought back over 20 some Christmas messages I’ve prepared, and there has not been one on Joseph. So I thought this is the year to look at Joseph’s perspective. He’s a character who delights to be in the background. But the grace God gave him is a grace you and I need today in order to live for Jesus Christ in this world. We desperately need the grace Joseph received if we want to live faithfully for Jesus. Today we’re going to focus on Joseph’s resolution, God’s revelation and our reputation.

Joseph’s Resolution

We see his resolution in Matthew 1:18-19. We know he’s not a rich man, because when it came time to present Jesus in the temple, they brought two turtle doves or pigeons as their offering. That was the offering prescribed for those too poor to afford more. He’s a simple carpenter, but he’s also a man with royal blood running in his veins. In verse 20, the angel called him “son of David.”

Matthew’s genealogy focuses on Jesus’ lineage through Joseph’s line to show that He’s the royal heir to the throne of David. We see in verses 18 and 19 that Joseph, like David, is a man after God’s own heart—in Matthew’s words, a “just man.” The Hebrew word is *sadiq*, a righteous man, someone known for his uncompromising devotion to the Torah, God’s law. Here was a man who did not open his carpenter shop on the Sabbath, who did not eat meat that the law did not approve, who was very serious about keeping the Ten Commandments. He wanted to love God with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength and love his neighbor as himself (Mark 12:30-31).

His reputation was one of righteousness. Everyone knew him as a man who was blameless in all his ways. He was the Psalm 1 type of guy. He did not walk in the way of the wicked or stand in the place of scoffers or sit in the seat of mockers which is the character of a man who is devoted to God's law—and that was Joseph. Or look at Psalm 15, which describes the integrity required to ascend into the holy presence of the Lord. That was the kind of man Joseph aspired to be.

He was also a betrothed man. Verse 19 tells us Mary was betrothed to him. Don't just think of this as being like our engagement. It was much more permanent and serious and significant. When two people were betrothed, they were legally and publicly committed to each other. In order to get out of a betrothal, it required a legal divorce. You couldn't just walk away from this commitment the way people now walk away from an engagement.

So can you imagine what it was like for Joseph to discover that Mary was pregnant? There was a shame and honor society, so this was like the ultimate slap in the face to Joseph. He would have seen it as a betrayal and the shattering of all his dreams. We can imagine the emotional upheaval in this young man's heart, a man who is so committed to righteousness, when he discovers that the woman to whom he is betrothed is now with child.

Don't imagine in these pre-scientific days that Joseph didn't know where babies came from. He knew. Everyone knew. And everyone would have drawn one of two scandalous conclusions: either Mary had slept with someone other than Joseph—thus rejecting and betraying, which would have brought shame on Joseph—or else Joseph and Mary had committed fornication.

Betrothal was a time of testing, a time of preparation for the marriage, a time of proving a person's devotion to the one they would marry. All Joseph knows is, "I did not make her pregnant. The baby in her womb does not belong to me." But no one else knows what really happened. So to a righteous man who was devoted to God's law, as Joseph was, this brought great shame. It also presented him with a great dilemma. But as verse 19 tells us, not only was Joseph righteous, he was also a kind and compassionate man.

I was reading something by J. Ligon Duncan, where he said something like this: "You meet a lot of righteous people who are not very kind, and you meet a lot of kind people who are not very righteous. But how rare it is to find a person who is both righteous and kind. Such a person reflects the character of our Heavenly Father."

What does Psalm 145 say about our God in heaven? "*The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.*" What a wonderful combination: righteousness and kindness. So even

though Joseph's heart is broken, even though he feels betrayed, even though he's bearing shame from Mary's pregnancy, he is looking for the most gentle way to be both righteous and kind in this situation. So he resolves to divorce Mary quietly so the shame would fall more lightly on her. He does not want to expose her to public shame. He cannot erase all the suspicion or put away the stigma, but he is doing all he can to be selfless in trying to protect the girl whom he thought had sinned.

He keeps bringing this before the Lord. We get that from verse 20. He doesn't just make a snap decision and boom, it's done. Verse 20 said he considers these things. We know he sleeps on it at least one night. He doesn't just put her away—he considers, “What's the best way to handle this?” I assume he prays before the Lord about it.

We should handle perplexing situations in the same way, not making rash decisions but bringing them before the Lord. Matthew Henry says, “The Lord gives guidance to the thoughtful, not to the unthinking.” Joseph was thoughtful.

So we see Joseph's resolution in verses 18 and 19, which is a reflection of the righteousness, compassion and kindness of his character. Now let's move to God's revelation in verses 20-23.

God's Revelation

While Joseph is sleeping, God sends an angel. The angel addresses him, “Joseph, son of David,” and gives him this gracious command that we've been focusing on throughout the Advent season: “Be not afraid.”

In seven different ways in this passage, Matthew and the angel point out the divine origin of this Baby in Mary's womb—the divine conception of this Baby. The angel reveals to Joseph what we've already seen in verses 18 and 19, that this pregnancy took place before they came together, that it was from the Holy Spirit, and that Joseph was a just man. There is no guilt in him for this pregnancy.

Now, in verse 20, the angel tells Joseph what God has already been telling us through Matthew. The angel says to Joseph, “*Do not fear to take Mary as your wife.*” In other words, “Joseph, there is nothing sinful here, nothing to be ashamed of.” “*For,*” the angel says, “*that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*” God wants us to understand this very clearly. The birth of Jesus came about as the result of a divine conception, a miracle. Mary was a virgin. The Holy Spirit caused this conception.

Then the angel tells Joseph in verse 21 what he is to name the Child. *“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,”* Joshua, Yeshua. It was a very common name. There were lots of little Jesuses running around in that society. It means, “The Lord saves. Yahweh saves.” But here is a Child that finally is going to live up to that name. “You are to call His name Jesus because that’s what He’s going to do.” *“He will save his people from their sins.”* Other kings and queens attach high-sounding names and titles to themselves, like “Leo the Great,” or “Henry the Conqueror,” or “David the Magnificent.”

But Jesus says, “I’m content to be called Savior.” How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear. It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds and drives away our fears. Jesus. Savior. That’s what He wants to be called, because He saves us from our sins. He atones for the guilt of our sins through the blood He shed on the cross. He delivers us from the power of our sins through the gift of His Holy Spirit that He can give us as a result of His resurrection life.

And He is going to free us from the very presence of our sins and from all the contamination of our sins when we see Him face to face, and we will be like Him because we will see Him as He is. We will live in a new creation where we will be saved to sin no more. There won’t be a trace of sin’s contamination there. That’s what we’re looking forward to, because Jesus came to save His people from their sins. Thank You, Jesus. That’s what you’re to call Him, Joseph. Name Him Jesus, Savior.

Then Matthew tells us in verse 22, *“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.”* You might remember the first Advent message when we were back in Isaiah 7. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 here: *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.”* Interestingly, in the Old Testament it says, *“You shall call his name Immanuel.”* But Matthew now says, *“They shall call his name Immanuel”* (1:23). In other words, His name is Jesus because what He does is He saves us from our sin.

But what people will know Him as—when you think of Jesus our Savior—one of the first things you’re going to think of “God is with us.” Emmanuel. He is God with us—the One Who created the entire universe. God, in all His holiness and transcendence and majesty is now with us, alongside us, in our world, dwelling among us, tabernacling with us. We get to see His glory and we get to know Him now, because He’s become one of us. He communicates human to human with us. And He will never leave us nor forsake us.

At the beginning of Matthew it says His name is Emmanuel, God with us. Then some of the last words of the Gospel of Matthew are these: *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* One of the greatest themes of this Gospel is that God is with us. This was all God’s

plan. Even the shame, the reproach, the indignity and suspicion that would fall upon Joseph and upon Mary and upon Jesus—it was God’s plan that our salvation would come through a Savior Who would bear shame, scoffing, reproach, unthinkable indignity, ending with death on a cruel cross. This was God’s plan. And Jesus took our shame and reproach upon Him even when He was in the womb of His virgin mother. He started bearing our shame and reproach even then, as an embryo in the womb. If Joseph wants to identify himself personally with Jesus, Joseph is also going to have to bear shame and reproach in this world—and so will we. So will we.

Our Reputation

That brings us to the last point: our reputation. Let’s look at verses 24 and 25, starting with Joseph’s response. He wakes from sleep and does as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He takes his wife. He knows her not—he has no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a Son. Then he did just as the angel told him. He called His name Jesus.

In Joseph’s response, we see kindness, faithfulness, sacrifice—no union until the Baby is born. He is obedient, giving Him the name he was told to give Him. And from our vantage point it all looks so noble. We admire Joseph. We praise Joseph for his godly character—and we should admire him. He’s a wonderful example for us of meekness, humility and obedience.

We should marvel at his trust in the Lord. I mean, what was this like—to hear the angel say, “Your betrothed wife is pregnant and God did this”? This goes against all expectations. This is not what the human mind is trained to believe. But Joseph believes the word of God, and he not only accepts it, he acts upon it. It’s wonderful!

But it’s going to cost him something. We look at Joseph and say he is noble. What about the people who came into his carpenter shop? Joseph is measuring some wood for them, and they ask, “How much is this all going to cost?” He gives them a figure—20 drachmas or whatever. And they look at him with suspicion. “Are you sure?” Joseph says, “Trust me. I’m an honest man.” Then little Jesus comes walking out. “Oh, yeah, you’re an honest man—right. We remember that your wife was pregnant before you got married.”

There was always a stigma that Joseph and Mary had to face. There’s no way you can explain to the watching world, “You know, the Baby inside me is not Joseph’s. It’s from the Holy Spirit.” People don’t believe those kinds of things. People scoff at that. There was a stigma. There was shame associated with it. We don’t know if Joseph lost business or if people thought maybe he was less righteous then. We do know he would soon have to flee to Egypt, leaving everything behind, in order to take care of the Messiah. We do know that Joseph allowed his own

reputation to fade. He had to die to man's empty praise. He had to ignore snickers, slander and suspicion for the sake of Jesus.

Likewise, if you want to follow Jesus—and if I want to follow Jesus—we're going to have to die to man's empty praise too. We're going to have to die to what people think of us. We're going to have to be willing to bear some reproach for the sake of Jesus Christ. There will be times in our sophisticated culture when people are going to think you're gullible because you believe the Bible. People are going to mock you because of the stand you take. You're going to be an outcast or alienated. Following Jesus means denying self, taking up a cross daily (Luke 9:23), dying to man's opinions. You also have to give up your right to determine your own future. I mean, what did every Jewish man want to do when his baby boy was born? You want to name that boy. You want to give that boy his identity in this world. Joseph didn't even get that privilege. This Baby could not be called Joey, Jr. This Baby was already named by God. So Joseph has to give all that up.

Here's the thing. If you want Jesus to come into your life, you can't say, "Jesus, I'll follow You if You're like this. Here's the list of what I want in a Savior. You've got to agree with me on this, this and this, then I'll agree with You on this, this and this." No. When you follow Him, Jesus says, "Here. Hand over your life to Me, and you will go where I will lead you. You will believe what I will tell you. You will do whatever I ask you to do. You don't name Me—I name you. You don't control My destiny—I control yours."

That's what it means to follow Jesus. There will be a cost. As we think about that this Christmas, I want to read two Scriptures that encourage us to count the cost. I want to encourage you to determine in your heart today whether there's anything more important to you than following Jesus. I want to ask are you willing to hand your identity over to Him? To give up your reputation for the sake of Christ? Are you willing to be mocked, slandered or reproached in order to identify with Jesus?

Because we see in Jesus' earthly father this is part of the cost. But never once does Joseph even give a hint that he thought that was a cost not worth paying. We get the impression that this was the delight of Joseph's life—to welcome Jesus into his home, into his family, into his heart, and to become a follower of His. If you know Jesus will save you from your sins and that He is "God with you", it doesn't matter what the cost is, because the treasure you've found in Jesus is so much greater.

So listen to the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:7-11. Ask yourself: can I say this about my relationship with the Lord Jesus?

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Can you say that: everything else is loss for the sake of knowing Christ? Then listen to this challenge from Hebrew 13:13-14, because I think this is what it means to be a Christ-follower in the United States in 2016 and beyond: *“Therefore let us go to [Jesus] outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”*

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.net