

A RIGHTEOUS MAN

Matthew 1:18–25

I wonder how your Christmas preparations are going. We have high expectations of Christmas, don't we – unrealistic ones sometimes. Advertisers program us to expect the warm glow of chestnuts roasting on an open fire and the whole family sitting round the festive table, everything calm and bright. But the reality in the run up to Christmas is so different, frazzled nerves, frayed tempers. Tidings of comfort and joy are pushed out by feelings of anxiety and dread.

If you're feeling like this, and yet you're sure you ought not to be, then this message is for you. Today we're looking at Joseph. Luke's Gospel puts Mary in the spotlight but Matthew focuses on Joseph, Joseph who was of the royal line of David. Yet even Matthew begins by drawing attention to Mary rather than Joseph initially.

Verse 18. 'This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.' Some of the older translations say, 'betrothed' to Joseph.

Jewish weddings at that time involved three separate steps. First, there was engagement. This was often arranged by the parents or by a professional matchmaker while the couple were still children.

At a later stage came the betrothal. It was a legally binding relationship which lasted for a year. During this period the couple lived apart and had no sexual relations but if either of them wanted to part they had to get a divorce. In the eyes of the law they were husband and wife. In the law of Moses the penalty for sleeping with a virgin betrothed to another man was death by stoning.

Engagement, betrothal, and the third step was the marriage itself.

When we are introduced to Mary and Joseph they were at the second step, betrothal. It should have been a happy time, a time of excitement and anticipation, a time when both families could look forward to the celebrations at the wedding itself. But sadly, that was not to be. Matthew tells us that 'before they came together, she was found to be with child'. Mary was pregnant.

Matthew reminds us straight away that she was with child 'through the Holy Spirit' but Joseph had only Mary's word for that. Suddenly things weren't so happy in the family. Eager excitement gave way to awkward embarrassment. Joseph must have got that awful feeling in the pit of your stomach that just seems to eat you up from the inside. What was he to do?

Verse 19 tells us what he decided. A literal translation of the verse goes like this: Joseph her husband being righteous and not wanting to expose her to public disgrace decided to divorce her quietly.

What does it mean when it says that Joseph was a righteous man? Was his righteousness something warm and loving that made him tender towards Mary in spite of the situation? Or was his righteousness something cold and legalistic that he had to overcome in order to be tender towards her?

The Revised English Bible translation leans towards this second way of reading it. 'Being a man of principle, and at the same time wanting to save her from exposure, Joseph made up his mind to have the marriage contract quietly set aside.'

The New Testament has quite a lot to say about righteousness and this is the first mention of the subject. As we read on in this Gospel, Matthew himself will have more to say about it.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reminded us that God is righteous. Matthew chapter 6 verse 33: 'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.' God is perfectly righteous. He is just in his judgments. His will is the perfect standard of what is right.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus also spoke about righteousness in a human context. God's love is shown to both the righteous and the unrighteous. Chapter 5 verses 44 and 45: 'But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and

sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.' I don't think we need too much help in identifying who those two groups are, the righteous and the unrighteous.

In Jesus' day the greatest examples of righteousness at a human level were the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Being righteous in the sense of keeping the law was their top priority. It was an obsession and it meant they were not comfortable people to be around. But Jesus said a most interesting thing to his disciples, once again in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5 verse 20: 'I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.' He went on to say something even more challenging than that in verse 47: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Our standard of righteousness is not the top-of-the-range human righteousness of the most religious people. It's nothing less than God's righteousness.

God's righteousness is not a cold, calculating 'pound of flesh' kind of justice. It is shot through with love and compassion. On the other hand it is not soft and sentimental either. God's righteousness is anchored in justice. Sin cannot be ignored. Sin must be punished. But God's righteousness is shot through with compassion. He sent his only Son, the Lord Jesus, to take the punishment for sin so that, in Paul's words, God might both do right and yet put right everyone who has faith in Jesus. God has found a way of both being just and at the same time acquitting the sinner.

There's a verse in John's first letter which highlights this amazing paradox of grace. It's in chapter 1 verse 9: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.' Just think about that for a moment. Surely that can't be right. If we own up and admit our sins he is faithful and just. If he is faithful and just then surely he should punish our sins, but it says, he is faithful and *just* (it's that same word 'righteous') and will *forgive* us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. How can that be? The answer is in verse 7. 'The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin'.

I think when Matthew described Joseph as a righteous man he was anticipating this understanding of righteousness. Joseph could have brought the full force of the law against Mary. To say that she was pregnant and yet still a virgin must have sounded as implausible then as it does to many people still today. Yet Joseph was a righteous man. He couldn't bring himself to expose Mary to public disgrace. He made up his mind to take an option that the law allowed, to arrange a very quiet divorce before the minimum number of witness, that is, two witnesses, and not press any charges.

When we get to verse 20 there's a surprise development in the story. Joseph had weighed up all the pros and cons. He had considered all the possibilities open to him and because he was a righteous man he had decided to get a divorce. It was then that something amazing happened. 'After he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."'

Joseph desperately wanted to do the right thing. He was a righteous man. He could take the line of harsh righteousness, the kind the Pharisees exemplified. He could take the line of compassionate righteousness, the kind that Jesus himself was to demonstrate. Either way, the end result was divorce. But there was a third option, one he could not have dreamed of in a million years, and it was God's option.

The answer to his dilemma came not from the evolution of human wisdom but the invasion of divine wisdom. He didn't work it out himself. It was revealed to him by God. The answer was that God was at work in a miraculous way and Joseph simply had to trust where he could not see. It was a classic example of Proverbs chapter 3 verse 5: 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.'

Joseph was a righteous man. Righteousness is more than cold justice. Righteousness is more than considerate kindness. Righteousness is trust, faith in God, believing where you cannot see.

There's a verse in the Old Testament that's quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). It's Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4 and it says, 'The righteous will live by faith.'

That means accepting the limits of your own wisdom and trusting completely in God. It means abandoning your own control of your life and handing over to God. It means admitting that you could never earn God's favour by your own righteousness and accepting the salvation that he freely gives in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God revealed his word to Joseph through a dream. I want you to notice what he said, or initially, what he didn't say. He didn't say, 'Poor old Joseph, you are in a fix. You've got every right to feel sorry for yourself.' If you've come to church this morning expecting God to say something like that to you then you'll be mistaken.

God said, 'Joseph, son of David...' That was a reassurance. Then God said, 'Do not be afraid.' That was a reassurance. Then God gave him a clear instruction. 'Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.' With the instruction came an explanation: 'because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'.

Matthew reminds us in verses 22 and 23 that all this was a fulfilment of prophecy. Joseph's story continues in verses 24 and 25: 'When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.'

Joseph is not really a very prominent person in the Gospels. The last place he appears with any significance is in Luke chapter 2 when Jesus was aged just twelve and the family were up in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When Jesus was grown up we read about his mother and his brothers and sisters but Joseph is nowhere to be seen, and the most likely explanation is that he had died.

The only place where Joseph has any real prominence is in the opening two chapters of Matthew's Gospel. The thing that really stands out is his obedience to God. It's expressed very simply in chapter 1 verse 24. 'He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.'

The angel said, 'Take Mary home as your wife.' He took Mary home as his wife. The angel said, 'You are to give him the name Jesus.' And he gave him the name Jesus.

Later, after Jesus was born the angel appeared to him again and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

Later the angel appeared to him again in Egypt. 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel.' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

The way Matthew describes Joseph's actions makes it clear that his obedience was immediate, that it was unquestioning, and that it was complete.

When Paul wrote to the Romans he said, 'In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, "The righteous will live by faith.' In that same context he said, 'We received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.'

The obedience that comes from faith. Joseph is the classic example of that.

In the Beatitudes Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6). What does it mean to be righteous?

It means to have a basic awareness of right and wrong, a sense of justice. It means to have a warm heart that does not turn that sense of justice into something cold and harsh. It means to be compassionate and considerate. It also means to reach that point where you stop relying on yourself and trust in God's salvation. It means turning that faith into obedience, not just knowing God's will but doing it.