

A New Kind of Righteousness

Matthew 1:18-25

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It was a traditional Christmas pageant. There were angels and shepherds all dressed up. Mary and Joseph were ready to make their entrance, and Joseph was supposed to walk solemnly beside Mary to the center of the stage. The narrator was supposed to read the Biblical story about Joseph going to Bethlehem “to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child.” But the director decided that the children didn’t really understand the Elizabethan English of the King James Version, so at the last minute, she switched to the Good News Bible. As Mary and Joseph entered, the narrator read, “Joseph went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant.” As the last word echoed through the P.A. system, little Joseph froze in his tracks. This is not how he had heard it in rehearsal. He gave Mary an incredulous look, then looked out at the congregation and said, “Pregnant? What do you mean, pregnant?”

Can you imagine what Joseph was thinking when he learned Mary was pregnant? He was betrothed to Mary. That was not exactly like being engaged today; you notice that Matthew calls him Mary’s husband. Betrothal was a binding legal contract to marry, made between families, and you could not get out of it without a divorce. If there was any infidelity during the period of betrothal, it was treated legally as adultery. There was really nothing Joseph could do but divorce Mary and call the whole thing off.

That was what righteousness required. Verse 19 makes that clear: “Because Joseph was a righteous man...he planned to divorce her quietly.” We don’t often think of divorce as one of the requirements of righteousness, but it certainly was in Joseph’s time. Jewish law demanded that a man divorce his wife if she was guilty of adultery, and so did Roman law. Roman law said that to keep such a wife was like running a brothel in your house. It was inconceivable to Joseph and to people of his day that he should just “let it slide.” There aren’t many people who would do that today; if you’ve ever seen the Maury Povich Show you’ve seen how husbands react to learning that they are not the biological fathers of their children.

But along comes an angel of the Lord who speaks to Joseph in a dream. The angel tells Joseph that the pregnancy really *is* from the Holy Spirit as Mary says, so Joseph should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Not that anyone else will believe this, mind you. People will still assume that Mary and you fooled around, or if they know you well, they may assume that you decided out of embarrassment to claim that the child of her lover is your own child.

I’ve been thinking about the fact that Matthew couched this dilemma in terms of righteousness, because being righteous is a very important theme in Matthew’s gospel. The word is used 18 times. When Jesus is baptized, he says he is doing it to fulfill all righteousness (3:15). You can probably think of a few other uses of the term: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” (5:6); “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (6:33). In a key verse in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his disciples “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). And yet over and over Jesus gets into conflicts with those Pharisees and teachers because he does not follow the letter of their law with regard to the Sabbath or washing or eating with sinners. He says in the Sermon on the Mount

that their idea of righteousness is on the *surface* of things (don't murder, don't commit adultery) whereas *true* righteousness means an end to anger and hatred and lust.

So now here's Joseph, the righteous man, who understands righteousness as most people do—as following the rules. And the law says that he must divorce Mary because she is a sinner. But the angel comes and tells him to choose another path. The angel suggests that there is another kind of righteousness—not doing what the law requires, not doing what people expect, but obeying God's call.

Not only is this new kind of righteousness not concerned with rules, but it is also not concerned with appearances. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus keeps saying, "When you do deeds of righteousness, do them in secret, not because you care what other people think. All that matters is what your Father in heaven thinks of you." And so it is with Joseph. No one will understand why you are not doing the right thing as religion sees it. God is calling you to do something different.

True righteousness makes you willing to be considered a sinner. So it was with the son Joseph raised: "We accounted him stricken, struck down by God...they made his grave with the wicked" (Isaiah 53: 4, 9). True righteousness made Jesus identify with sinners and welcome them into God's reign. In one of his conflicts with the religious in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said to them, "Go and learn what the Scripture means when God says 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call those who consider themselves righteous but those who see themselves as sinners" (9:13).

Already when the angel appears to Joseph it was clear that Jesus was coming for sinners. The baby is to be named Jesus—or Yeshua, a form of the Old Testament name Joshua, which means "Yahweh saves." But in the book of Joshua the name is all about God saving his people from their enemies, often with violence. And in Joseph's time, the first century, the expectation was that the Messiah would save God's people from the Romans. But the angel says, surprisingly, that the baby will be called Yeshua "for he will save his people *from their sins*."

Is it righteous to save people from their sins? Shouldn't people have to pay for their sins? Shouldn't there be justice? Already you see the gospel is pointing us away from a righteousness that means following the rules to the new righteousness of mercy. When Jesus began announcing the forgiveness of sins, the religious people said, "How dare he!" How dare he save people from their sins? People should be punished for their sins. But here already in the story of Jesus we see pointers to the great revelation of God's mercy. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote (Philippians 3:9) about not having a righteousness of his own, based on obeying the law, but a righteousness that comes through faith in the Messiah, a righteousness that is a gift from God.

The cross and resurrection have revealed that the righteousness of God *is* mercy. This table represents that mercy. It represents the fact that Jesus saved us once and for all from our sins. We do not come to this table to be reminded how unrighteous we are, to beat ourselves up for our sins, hoping by our own guilt feelings somehow to atone for them. This table tells us that the old righteousness based on good behavior is a thing of the past. We have a new kind of righteousness, the righteousness of mercy. Mercy is the righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Mercy is the life we have been given, that we might show mercy to others.

That this table would be associated in our minds with strictness or feelings of unworthiness is a tragedy and a great misunderstanding of its meaning. This is the table of

mercy. These are the tokens of love, symbols of the flesh and blood of the God-man who demonstrated his mercy by taking into his body the blows of justice which we deserved. And what God wants from us now as always is not sacrifice—not ritual repeated in the desperate hope that we can appease God—but mercy. If we have faith in Jesus—that is, if we believe that Jesus reveals the real God and real salvation—we can live our lives not on the basis of rules or keeping score but on the basis of mercy, treating others with that same mercy which we ourselves have received.

Every time we invite you to this table, we are inviting you to receive that mercy deep into your soul. We are inviting you to abandon a life of following rules or trying to look good or explaining yourself to others. We are inviting you to a new life in which your old ways have no more power over you, precisely because you have received mercy. Amen.