

LOVE: THE TRUE MEANING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Before I begin my sermon today, I need to tell you that I'm EXTREMELY grateful for the work of 3 biblical scholars and teachers: John Pilch, John Ortberg and Scott MacKnight. What I SHARE with you today is THEIR work! Verse 19 in our Scripture Lesson tells us that JOSEPH was a RIGHTEOUS man. Now, there's a rich HISTORY behind this idea. The WORD for *RIGHTEOUS man* in HEBREW is the word, **tsaddiyq** (saw-deek). Let me hear you SAY, **tsaddiyq**.... ANY man, in Jesus' day, who was a **tsaddiyq** was KNOWN for his uncompromising OBEDIENCE to the *TORAH*, to the LAW of Moses. And MATTHEW tells us that THAT'S who **JOSEPH** was. Therefore, we KNOW that he didn't EAT unclean foods. He didn't MIX with the WRONG kinds of PEOPLE. He didn't keep his carpentry shop OPEN on the Sabbath to make a few extra denarii. No! JOSEPH was a **tsaddiyq**! THAT was his IDENTITY! And EVERYBODY would have KNOWN this about him. SO, nobody would have invited JOSEPH over for HAM sandwiches with prostitutes and tax collectors. AND, AS a **tsaddiyq**, JOSEPH was what the PEOPLE of his day wanted to BE, like a BUSINESSMAN today wants to be a CEO, and an ATHLETE wants to be an ALL-STAR. An ISRAELITE wanted to be a **tsaddiyq**, because THEN you were ADMIRER. THEN you were looked UP to. THEN you were a SOMEBODY! And THAT was JOSEPH! And Matthew's READERS would have KNOWN all this as SOON as Matthew called him a **tsaddiyq**. Too often, WE read the Bible through our 21st Century, North American eyes, and DON'T learn about the CULTURE in which it was written. SO, we don't UNDERSTAND what MATTHEW'S readers would have taken for GRANTED. Yes, JOSEPH here is a **tsaddiyq**.

But NOW, he is a **tsaddiyq** with a PROBLEM! The GIRL that he's promised to MARRY -- the girl to whom he's BETROTHED -- is going to have a baby, and WHOEVER the father IS, Joseph KNOWS that it's NOT him. And DON'T think of betrothal as engagement, even though that's what OUR translation says. Betrothal was an actual STEP in the marriage process, and ENDING a betrothal required a legal DIVORCE. Furthermore, NAZARETH was a small town, SO, they probably only had ONE purification bath, TO which EVERY woman in the village had to GO once-a-month, according to her MENSTRAL cycle. Well pretty soon, they would have realized that MARY had not shown UP this month. And WE know what HAPPENS in SMALL towns, don't we? WORD gets around VERY quickly. SO, we have a **tsaddiyq**, we have a PREGNANT fiancée, and we have a SMALL village where, as a general rule, EVERYBODY knows everybody ELSE'S business. So YES, JOSEPH is a **tsaddiyq** with a PROBLEM!

Now, because WE live on the other SIDE of Christmas, WE want to RUSH to the END of the story, where everything turns out OK. And we MIGHT even be tempted to think that Joseph was kind of SLOW spiritually, and that he should have figured OUT what was going ON a whole lot SOONER than he did. But if we THINK that, we MISS the POINT of what JOSEPH is LEARNING -- and of what WE can learn FROM him. You see: there's some AMAZING stuff going ON in the Christmas story, in ADDITION to just telling us HOW Jesus GOT here. Even NOW, even before the birth, God is ALREADY beginning to REDEFINE what it MEANS to be RIGHTEOUS, what it MEANS to be a RIGHTEOUS person, what it MEANS to be a **tsaddiyq**.

SO, let's walk in JOSEPH'S shoes for awhile. Put yourself in HIS place. Your fiancée is pregnant. You're NOT the father. And your WHOLE reputation revolves around just ONE thing: your obedience to the *Torah*, the LAW. WHAT the *Torah* SAYS is what YOU do. THAT'S who you ARE. And the *Torah* has some very CLEAR instructions about what to DO with someone in MARY'S condition. Deuteronomy 22 has a section that covers marriage violation. *IF a woman pledged to be married is UNFAITHFUL*, it says, *she shall be brought to the door of her father's house, and THERE, the men of her town shall STONE her to DEATH. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being PROMISCUOUS while STILL in her father's house. You must PURGE this evil from among you.* And if THIS seems rather UNREAL to you, it STILL happens TODAY. There's was a SIMILAR case in NIGERIA just a few YEARS ago. And IF Joseph thought that she had been SEDUCED by another MAN, according to *Torah*, they were BOTH to be STONED to death.

SO, the *Torah* is very CLEAR, and Joseph's reputation as a **tsaddiyq** is on the line. And everybody KNEW what he would DO. His fellow **tsaddiyqim** would have TOLD him that this SIN must be publicly

EXPOSED and PUNISHED. **BUT**, Joseph just could NOT bring himself to DO it. Now, to understand the TENSION here, we HAVE to do a little GRAMMAR work. There's a grammatical construction in verse 19 that is called, in Greek, a *circumstantial participle*. It's a kind of PARTICIPLE that can be translated in a number of different ways, maybe **8 or 9** different ways, DEPENDING upon the CONTEXT or the CIRCUMSTANCES. And it can be translated with a NUMBER of phrases, such as: *BECAUSE* or *WHILE*, *by MEANS of* or *in ORDER to* or *ALTHOUGH*. And HOW we translate it DEPENDS upon its CONTEXT.

Now, Matthew 1:19 LITERALLY says, *Joseph, BEING righteous....* And the question is: HOW do you translate this PHRASE, that CIRCUMSTANTIAL participle, *being righteous*? You CAN translate it in a CAUSAL sense: *Joseph, BECAUSE he was righteous*. And SOME translations say that. **BUT**, John Pilch, a biblical scholar from *Georgetown University*, tells us that the BEST translation is this: *Joseph, ALTHOUGH he was RIGHTEOUS....* So, ALTHOUGH he is a **tsaddiyq**, ALTHOUGH he is a RIGHTEOUS man, he DOESN'T want to cause a SCANDAL. Now, in the OLD system, righteousness would have DEMANDED that Mary be EXPOSED and punished. Sinners NEED to be EXCLUDED. Standards NEED to be maintained. In the OLD system, righteousness always SEPARATES itself from SIN and SINNERS. And we have churches TODAY that LIVE by that OLD system, don't we? And by THAT system, a RIGHTEOUS man would not hesitate. But, Joseph HESITATES! He just cannot BRING himself to go PUBLIC, although he is a **tsaddiyq**.

Now, it doesn't take much imagination to KNOW how Joseph MUST have AGONIZED over this decision day after day. Put yourself in HIS place. You're betrothed to a 13-year old. And she COMES to you and says: *I have some BAD news and some GOOD news. The BAD news is: I'm PREGNANT, even though we're not MARRIED. But the GOOD news is that I haven't been with anyone ELSE. An ANGEL came to me and said: Hail Mary, full of grace! And I'M going to have a MIRACLE baby, and ALL generations will call me BLESSED. I KNOW it's never happened before, but it's GOING to happen NOW.* Yes, IMAGINE Joseph's STRUGGLE! Now, most likely, this 13-year old is his FIRST cousin, because THAT'S who people married in the Middle East (In fact, they STILL do! Saddam Hussein's WIFE was his FIRST cousin). And Mary SEEMED sincere! But an ANGEL? A VIRGIN birth? NO WAY! SO, he decides to DIVORCE her quietly. THAT way, he can minimize HER suffering, while keeping his OWN status as a **tsaddiyq**, as a righteous man.

But THEN, in verse 20, God sends a MESSAGE to Joseph. It says: *But JUST when he had resolved to DO this, an ANGEL of the Lord appeared to him in a DREAM.* Now, WHY do you think GOD makes Joseph WAIT until AFTER he STRUGGLES so MUCH with his decision? WHY couldn't an ANGEL just come to him ahead of time, EXPLAIN to him everything that's going on, and REMOVE all of his ANXIETY about it? Well, is it POSSIBLE that ANXIETY-REMOVAL is NOT God's number one GOAL for Joseph -- or MAYBE for you and ME either? Is it possible that, in getting his WORLD turned upside down and having to struggle between what he THINKS a **tsaddiyq** OUGHT to do and his own LONGING to show COMPASSION to this young cousin, that MAYBE Joseph is being prepared by God to come to a whole NEW understanding of what it MEANS to be righteous? Is it possible that God ALLOWS us to go through times of DISEQUILIBRIUM sometimes, so that we can come to a whole new ERA of growth? Is it possible that in YOUR life, maybe right now, IF you're confused or disoriented or struggling with something, that maybe it's NOT because you've done something wrong, as SOME people often ASSUME. Maybe God is AT WORK in the midst of it all, and MAYBE you are about to GROW.... And SO, maybe what you need to DO is just WAIT on God, and TRUST that God is DOING something in your life that maybe YOU don't even KNOW about yet.

THINK about that, because THAT'S what happens HERE! The angel says: *Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.* Now, WHY would Joseph be AFRAID to wed Mary? Well, as a **tsaddiyq**, Joseph would be afraid of offending GOD and violating the *Torah*. But it's NOT just THAT! Joseph also fears LOSING his reputation. WHAT will people THINK of him? After all: Joseph has OWN doubts when Mary tells him about the angel. And he just KNOWS that there's NO WAY that OTHER people in town are going to BELIEVE that an ANGEL has come to a POOR couple in an OBSCURE village, and caused the conception of a CHILD in the body of a VIRGIN teenage girl. There's just NO WAY! And IF he marries her, his friends will NEVER accept HIS account of what's happened! And SO, he will NOT be invited into their homes! He will NOT be given their BUSINESS! And he will NEVER AGAIN be ADMIRER or RESPECTED as a LOVER of the *Torah*. Yes, IF Joseph commits himself to this BABY, to the One who would be known as JESUS, he will DO SO at an ENORMOUS sacrifice. His WHOLE reputation, the work of a LIFETIME, will be TRASHED.

SO, the angel says: *Don't be afraid, Joseph*. And THEN, Matthew tells us that Joseph DID what the angel COMMANDED. He did TWO things, in verses 24 and 25. First, he took MARY home as his WIFE. That's a LEGAL step. And secondly, he NAMED the baby. And that, TOO, is a LEGAL action. In the act of NAMING the baby, Joseph is publicly ADOPTING this child as his own SON. So LEGALLY, Joseph has now deliberately TIED his OWN destiny to the lives of TWO stained reputations. And THAT'S a decision that will AWE anybody who comprehends it, because NOW, HIS days as a **tsaddiyq**, as a righteous man, are OVER! Whatever the future HAS in store for Joseph, it will NOT be polite respectability or being admired by others.

And I'd like to SHOW you just how FULLY Joseph risked EVERYTHING on what God was doing here. How many brothers and sisters did Jesus have, and what were their names? Well, we find the answer in Mark 6. Jesus had 4 brothers named James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. And his sisters were Brittany and Jennifer. No! I just made THAT up (We don't know how many SISTERS he had)! Well, it's a little hard to tell from the ENGLISH translation, but each name is the GREEK version of the HEBREW name for one of Israel's great PATRIARCHS: Jacob, Joseph, Judah and Simeon. And scholars THINK that maybe Joseph and Mary GAVE their sons THESE names because they TRUSTED that, THROUGH Jesus, God was going to ACT one more time to RENEW God's people. THAT'S what God was UP TO, they believed, in the birth of JESUS.

It may also be that, in Mark 6:3, we see part of the PRICE that Joseph PAID for his decision to wed MARY, when the people say about Jesus: *Isn't this the son of MARY?* Now, probably Joseph was DEAD by now, but EVEN if the father had DIED, a man in Israel was ALWAYS referred to as the son of his FATHER: *Jesus bar Joseph*. And to refer to a man as the son ONLY of his MOTHER could be, and often WAS, a very HARSH expression, almost like calling him **a son of a B...** And Mark 6:3 may well REFLECT the fact that even DECADES later in THEIR little village, Joseph's reputation had STILL not recovered from the scandal.

And it's AMAZING for me to think about, how AFTER Joseph died, in the decades, centuries and now even MILLENNIA to follow, literally MILLIONS and MILLIONS of people have made sacrifices for the sake of this One called JESUS. Many have given up their STATUS, their possessions, their convenience; MANY their freedom, and many their LIVES. But JOSEPH, WHO would give up his identity and reputation for Jesus, had NOT even SEEN Him yet. And NOW, for Joseph, when he LOOKED into people's eyes, it would NEVER the SAME. NEVER again would they LOOK at him with the same kind of respect and adoration. BUT, when he looked into the eyes of his CHILD, Jesus, I'm sure he KNEW that he had done the RIGHT thing. And I think that maybe God decided that JESUS, who would be called a FRIEND of sinners, should be raised in a family that knew FIRSHTHAND what it FEELS like to be regarded as SECOND-CLASS. And maybe PART of why Jesus had such a HEART for unrespectable people is because He was raised in a family by a father, who had sacrificed his OWN respectability. And maybe one reason Jesus had so much compassion for WOMEN, who were walking SCANDALS, is because He KNEW what it meant to his MOM when his father had stuck BY her back when she was single and pregnant, and all the RIGHTEOUS folks would have said, *STONE HER!* And I think of how Jesus, as He was growing up, MUST have admired his dad's courage SO much. And I think about how LATER, when Joseph was LONG-DEAD and Jesus was a grown man, He taught in Matthew 5:20, *Unless your RIGHTEOUSNESS exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees -- the OLD system -- you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven*, and how Jesus must have been thinking inside: *I've seen the BETTER kind of righteousness firsthand -- my FATHER was such a man*. You see, friends: God was AT WORK, even in this odd, painful, lonely way of starting a family. And God STILL calls people to be like Joseph, to be willing to DIE to reputation and status and comfort for the sake of LOVE, because THAT is TRUE righteousness! You know: when Joseph made his decision to WED Mary, HE thought that it was the END of his being KNOWN as a RIGHTEOUS man. LITTLE did he KNOW that the Child he would ADOPT would bring to the human race a NEW kind of righteousness.... But THAT'S what Jesus DID! And THAT'S why we're HERE today, and WHY we seek to EXTEND that KINGDOM that was LAUNCHED by this little CHILD. Yes, LOVE is what REAL righteousness is all ABOUT. And at Christmastime, it's the BIRTH of LOVE that we celebrate, GOD'S love made FLESH! Friends, let's FOLLOW that LOVE! Let's be PEOPLE of love! Let's be RIGHTEOUS people, truly RIGHTEOUS people, a righteousness made KNOWN by our LOVE! Amen.