

**More Than Good
A Story of Righteousness
Matthew 1:18-25**

When does our faith become real?

If you have ever done the correct thing only to find out that it wasn't the right thing, then you understand Joseph's story – because Joseph is a guy who has a choice to make – a choice between good and Righteous. If he makes the good choice then everyone around him is happy and life will go on as it was. If he makes the Righteous choice his life will immediately become a huge mess.

The Problem: We live in a culture of appearances (even in the church). There is something in all of us that would rather be comfortable and untested regardless of the cost. Because it is unnerving and inconvenient to deal with life in its most raw and real form.

“You cannot deal with a perfect, all-loving, all-forgiving, all-understanding God in heaven, if you cannot deal with a less-than-perfect, less-than-forgiving, and less-than-understanding community here on earth... Part of the very essence of Christianity is to be together in a concrete community, with all the real human faults that are there and the tensions that this will bring.”

Ronald Rolheiser, The Holy Longing

Joseph's dilemma – He can stay with Mary, and everything they dreamed of will be lost in scandal, or he can divorce her and find someone who will help fulfill his dreams.

Joseph determined to divorce Mary. Crisis has a way of unearthing all kinds of foolish human solutions because we can't see past the moment – and that is terrifying.

Matthew is writing to a largely Jewish audience – here he mentions Joseph's plan to divorce Mary, and God's response, is to signal to the Jewish community that the accepted righteousness of the day might fly with the externally religious, but it doesn't fly with the Gospel. It is a subtle, but powerful reminder that with Jesus comes a new day.

And sure enough, one evening God comes to Joseph in a dream. As he sleeps, an Angel reveals God's plan – and it isn't the easy, convenient thing.

This is what God does. He stretches us and takes us to the edge of our own righteousness and reveals how far short we fall – that we always need Him.

The Angel says, 'Do not be afraid.' He unearths Joseph's fears, and then relieves them with the promise of Jesus.

It may be that Joseph just wanted out. Who could blame him? He got engaged under one assumption and was faced with a different reality. He had the right, didn't he?

You see, that's what man's righteousness does. It thinks in terms of propriety and rights and appearances and convenience. It rationalizes and justifies, and then finds a way to keep the status quo because it is safer, cleaner, less obtrusive, and more popular.

Friend, if you are a Christian, God isn't concerned with appearances of right-ness. He isn't concerned that you always do what is commonly acceptable.

And so if your goal is to be good, you need to know that God isn't impressed – this isn't His desire for your life.

Luke 18:9 – “To some who were confident in their own righteousness...”

What did Joseph do?

- He went to sleep (the ‘Ministry of the Next Thing’) – Joseph was obviously concerned – but he only did what he could do – the next thing – sleep. This is where God stepped in. While he was living out his life God entered and assured him that this was all part of something bigger than a teenage pregnancy. I have found that God often waits until I'm exhausted in my own strength – when I've finally given up on the notion that I am a god. Joseph did the next thing and went to sleep, and when he awoke, even though it was no less difficult, it all looked different.
- He let go of being right – Put another way – he let go of his tightly held, self-defined principles. Let me put it this way – If you are proud that you are right then you are probably wrong. If your principles stand in the way of people and mercy and love then you have bad principles. For you it is all about you and not at all about Christ. Joseph had to put to death his notion of good and correct – his life had been turned upside-down and he had to accept the fact that his neatly packed world was ordered, but not Righteous.
- He acted against his fear – Once he knew God's will he acted in faith – he believed that what he feared was smaller than

who he belonged to. God gave Joseph the Grace to be unconcerned with public opinion. And we find that God didn't want Joseph to protect Mary's reputation publicly, but He wanted him to protect her virginity privately. In other words, true Righteous is an inward thing that centers on what really matters. God didn't want Joseph to protect Mary's reputation. He wanted Joseph to protect Mary and therefore, Jesus.

The answer: Our faith becomes real when it faces real life, gives up and then survives – because of Jesus.

This means that God loves the truth of your badness more than the pretense of your goodness. Now this does not mean that He wants you to act wrongly – it simply means that self-righteousness is not going to do a thing for you. How else could the Gospel be true? It means that Righteousness comes when we acknowledge that we are unrighteous and desperately needy – that it is far better to be loved than perfect and graced than right – sheep who need their Shepherd.

And this is at the heart of Joseph's change – he bought into the fact that God loved him more than the public would embrace him. He figured out the secret that revolutionizes churches when they discover the Gospel's true meaning.

“His Law is Love and His Gospel is Peace...”

And here is the secret to living the Faith. It is relinquishing confidence in our own righteousness and resting in Jesus, the One True Righteous One – that you may enjoy Relationship with God.

1 Peter 3:18 – “for Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”