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A DAD FOR ALL SEASONS

Matthew 1:18-25

By

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Special Christmas Message

A Dad For All Seasons
Matthew 1:18-25 & other Scriptures

If God decided to send His Son to earth again to be born as a baby, and if He was looking for a suitable home where the child would be properly raised, would yours be in the running? Consider only the spiritual, moral, and relational qualities God would look for so that, from the human side, a couple could prepare the Savior for His ministry. Would your home qualify?

Why do you suppose that of all the people He could have chosen, God picked Joseph and Mary? I would have guessed that God would have picked somebody of prominence, perhaps a priest, a rabbi, a prophet, or a ruler. He would want His Son to be well-cared for, so I would have expected a family that was comfortable financially. Since His Son would need a first-rate education, God would probably pick a well-educated couple. Since the best schools, the best opportunities for meeting the "right" people, and for having the proper social upbringing would occur in a city, I would have expected the "right" couple to hail from Jerusalem.

But God didn't do it that way. He picked an obscure couple, unknown in the religious and social circles of Jerusalem. The man was not a ruler or even a rabbi, but a carpenter of no notoriety. We know that they were poor, because they offered the poor-man's sacrifice at Jesus' birth, a pair of turtledoves or pigeons (Luke 2:24). As far as we know, they were not well-educated. They were common, working people, living in the small, out-of-the-way village of Nazareth in the northern part of Israel known as Galilee.

Why this couple? We don't have time to examine them both today, so I want to narrow it down to Joseph. Why did God pick him out of all the other men in Israel for the awesome responsibility of being the earthly father to His incarnate Son? Though not much is written about Joseph in Scripture, enough is said to piece together a portrait of the man that provides helpful instruction to all who want to grow in godliness. Two qualities shine forth from

Joseph's life, qualities that may seem contradictory, but must be developed in balance: conviction and compassion.

Godly fathers are men of conviction and compassion.

While I'm focusing on fathers, the principle applies to every person, male and female, married and single, young and old: Godly people must develop biblical convictions which they hold to unswervingly; but they must hold those convictions with compassion toward others.

1. Godly fathers are men of conviction.

Four areas show Joseph to be a man of biblical conviction:

- A. Men of conviction have moral integrity.

Joseph was "a righteous man" (Matt. 1:19). He followed God's moral law. He didn't believe in situation ethics, in bending God's law to fit his situation. Even though it was sometimes very painful to obey, he obeyed God's Word.

And in this situation, it was painful. Joseph loved Mary. They were engaged to be married. Many of us can recall those wonderful feelings that engulfed us when we met that someone special and she consented to be our wife. It's a unique time in life, as you look forward to life together with the woman you love. Even though the Jewish customs were different than ours, we would be mistaken if we thought that Joseph was not caught up with the same feelings that we have when we fall in love.

According to Jewish custom, the engagement period lasted about one year before the marriage was consummated. But that period was taken much more seriously than our engagements are. The couple could not terminate the engagement except by a bill of divorce, and any breach of faithfulness was viewed as adultery (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Eerdmans], 1:150). In other words, they were as committed as we are just after the wedding ceremony.

In that context, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, and he knew that it wasn't his baby. Remember, the Jews were not expecting a virgin birth of Messiah at this point. Mary's condition was due to an unexpected, miraculous working of God. And so Joseph's only conclusion was that Mary had been unfaithful. That

thought pained him deeply. He knew that God took marriage seriously and that God wanted moral purity. Since he had not yet consummated their marriage and since he wanted a morally pure wife to raise his children, Joseph decided to break the engagement. Joseph held God's moral law in highest regard, even above his own feelings.

It's easy to have moral convictions until a situation comes up that causes you a lot of pain or grief. Then it's easy to bend those convictions to fit what you want rather than what God wants. In our day of relative morality, it's easy to grow accustomed to the loose standards of our culture and bend God's Word to fit our lifestyle, rather than to hold firmly to God's standards when everyone else, even fellow Christians, are compromising. I used to paint houses for a living. Often, when the owner would come home after we had been working all day, he would complain about the smell of the paint. But I had been working in there all day, and I didn't notice the smell any more. If we're not careful, that's what happens to us morally: we get so used to the stench that it doesn't bother us anymore.

But to be godly fathers, righteous men like Joseph, we need to hold strongly to the moral standards of God's Word.

B. Men of conviction fear God more than public opinion.

After the angel explained to Joseph the unique circumstances of Mary's conception (1:20-21), Joseph went ahead and took Mary as his wife (1:24). That took a lot of courage in that culture ("do not be afraid," 1:20). Their culture was not tolerant of having a baby out of wedlock. Mary's pregnancy before marriage would have triggered a lot of condemning stares and vicious gossip. "Psst! Did you hear that she got pregnant before they got married? And I hear that it wasn't even his baby!" For Joseph to stand with Mary, he had to fear God more than he feared the opinions of others.

To raise His Son, God picked a dad who feared God enough to stand with God against public opinion. Your kids need that kind of dad, too! Even if they complain, "But, dad, everyone else does it! Why can't we?" they still need a dad who fears God and obeys His Word, who explains, "We can't do that" or "we do this, because God's Word says so."

C. Men of conviction develop a habit of obedience.

Please note Matthew 1:24; 2:13-14; 2:20-21; 2:22. Every time God commanded something, Joseph responded with instant, unquestioning obedience. It was the pattern of his life to obey God, even when it wasn't especially convenient. "Flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you" (2:13). "Move to Egypt? That's a foreign country, Lord! They speak another language down there! How will I make a living? How can I get established in my business? It's a hassle to move a family that far! U-Haul doesn't even have a one-way rental to Egypt!"

Maybe you're thinking, "It may have been a hassle, but none of these commands were all that big of deal: 'Take Mary as your wife'; 'Move to Egypt'; 'Move back to Palestine'; 'Move to Galilee.'" But a habit of obedience to God is made up of obedience in the everyday, mundane matters of life. You're at Wal-Mart and the checker misses an item that was under your shopping cart. You're out in the parking lot when you discover the mistake. Do you gloat about how lucky you were to get the item for free, or do you go to the hassle and expense of going back and making it right? Your kids are learning from your example!

The kind of dad God picked to raise His Son was a man of conviction as seen in his moral integrity, his courage to fear God more than public opinion, and his habit of obedience.

D. Men of conviction develop godly habits of worship.

In Luke 2:22-24 we read of Joseph and Mary dedicating their son at the Temple. In verse 41 we learn that they had the custom of going to Jerusalem every year for the Feast of the Passover. In Luke 4:16 we discover that Jesus had the custom of weekly synagogue worship. Humanly speaking, where do you suppose Jesus learned that custom?

Every family has certain habits and customs. Some develop almost unawares, just by repetition. Others you develop deliberately by deciding that you want it to be a part of your regular family life. Once it's in place, you don't have to debate the matter every time it comes up. You just do it because it's your custom or habit.

Joseph and Mary had the custom of worshiping God regularly as His Word commands. In modern parlance, they had the habit of

regular church attendance. It wasn't up for grabs. They didn't just do it when there was nothing better to do or when they weren't too tired. They just did it! It was their custom. And why was it their custom? Because it reflected the priority of God in their lives. They honored God by keeping His day set apart for Him.

Dads, it communicates loads to your kids if your family only goes to church when it's convenient. The same goes for family Bible reading and prayer. It reflects your priorities. "We're too tired to get up for church today, so we're going to skip it." "We need some time off, so we're just going to have fun as a family this Sunday." Your kids aren't dumb. They figure out your priorities really quickly.

When God chose a man to raise His Son, He picked a man of conviction as seen in his moral integrity, his fear of God, his habit of obedience, and his godly habits of worship. But a man who is only marked by conviction can be stern and cold. He might make a great military officer, but he misses the mark as a godly dad. We also need compassion.

2. Godly fathers are men of compassion.

Humanly speaking, where do you suppose Jesus developed His tender love for children, His heart for the downtrodden, His compassion for those who were like sheep without a shepherd? I realize that He was God and so He had God's compassion. But, also, He was man, born as a baby, a child who had to grow "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). I vote for Joseph as the most likely human source for Jesus' compassion. Two clues in Matthew's gospel show us that Joseph was compassionate. Every dad needs these qualities:

A. Compassionate men are considerate of others.

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he had two options according to the customs of the day: He could institute a lawsuit against Mary for her unfaithfulness. Although the letter of the law prescribed stoning for an adulteress, Joseph could safely assume that this penalty would not be enforced. But a lawsuit would have exposed Mary to public disgrace and ridicule. Or, he could hand her a bill of divorcement (necessary to dissolve the engagement), dismissing her privately without public fanfare.

Joseph chose the latter because he did not want to disgrace Mary (1:19). Even though he was in pain and he thought at this point that Mary was responsible for his pain, he didn't want to get even or make her pay. He was considerate of her feelings. Biblical love, which we are to have even toward those who have hurt us deeply, seeks to protect and shield others rather than to make them pay.

As a godly dad, you need to think about how your actions make your child feel. You may be right in thinking that your child needs discipline. But you're probably wrong to correct him in front of others. Maybe he's done something that embarrasses you or makes you look bad. A godly dad judges his own pride, absorbs the embarrassment, and deals with the matter privately, because he is considerate of his child, even if the child has done wrong.

B. Compassionate men have tender feelings for others.

The various translations tone down the original of Matthew 1:20: Joseph "considered" or "thought about" these things. But the Greek word has the nuance of emotional reasoning. In some places it is used to describe angry, passionate reasoning. Joseph didn't sit down and calmly weigh his options. He was in turmoil as he tried to figure out what to do, because he loved Mary deeply, but he wanted to follow God fully.

Leonard Griffith (*Gospel Characters* [Eerdmans], p. 21) imagines Joseph as saying, "Oh, the agony, the tortured days and sleepless nights! My life was finished. I could never love anyone else but Mary. Nazareth was empty and my heart was empty without her. 'Why, O God, did you let this happen?' I prayed over and over again."

Joseph wasn't a stern moralist. He was a considerate man, with deep feelings for the one he loved. While biblical love is primarily a commitment, not feelings, it is not devoid of feelings. Paul describes it as being patient and kind (1 Cor. 13:4). He compares his own love for his converts as being the tender love of a nursing mother, a fond affection for them (1 Thess. 2:7-8).

Hear me carefully on this: Almost as important as *what* you teach your children is *how* you communicate it. I'm not minimizing biblical truth, as you know if you've heard me teach. But I'm saying

that God not only gave us heads to understand, but also hearts to feel. Your kids probably won't grow up and remember the doctrine you teach them, at least not as their own convictions, unless you impart it to them with a tender love that opens their hearts toward you. Your kids (and others) are not likely to adopt your convictions unless they sense your compassion toward them.

Conclusion

How do you communicate your convictions and compassion to your kids? Of course, you have to *model* it. You can't tell them one thing and do another yourself. Also, you have to *teach* it verbally by reading the Bible to them and talking about God's ways. But there's one ingredient in Joseph's life that we sometimes forget: *Time spent together*. How do I know that Joseph spent time together with Jesus as He was growing up? By putting together two verses: Matthew 13:55, which describes Jesus as "the carpenter's son"; and, Mark 6:3, which describes Jesus as "the carpenter." How did Jesus learn the trade of carpentry? By spending time with Joseph. As they worked together and ate together, Joseph both modeled and talked with Jesus about the things of God. Godly values are communicated to your kids by modeling and talking in the context of time spent together.

An insightful third grade girl wrote the following observations about grandmothers (cited by James Dobson, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women* [Tyndale], pp. 47-48):

A grandmother is a lady who has no children of her own. She likes other people's little girls and boys. A grandfather is a man grandmother. He goes for walks with the boys and they talk about fishing and stuff like that.

Grandmothers don't have to do anything except to be there. They're so old they shouldn't play hard or run. It is enough if they drive us to the market where the pretend horse is, and have a lot of dimes ready. Or if they take us for walks, they should slow down past things like pretty leaves and caterpillars. They should never say "hurry up."

Usually grandmothers are fat, but not too fat to tie your shoes. They wear glasses and funny underwear. They can take their teeth and gums off.

Grandmothers don't have to be smart, only answer questions like, "Why isn't God married?" and "How come dogs chase cats?" Grandmothers don't talk baby-talk like visitors do, because it is hard to understand. When they read to us, they don't skip or mind if it is the same story over again.

Everybody should try to have a grandmother, especially if you don't have television, because they are the only grownups who have time.

Joseph was not rich or successful in his business. In his own day he was not well-known; if he hadn't become the earthly father of Jesus, we never would have heard of him. He was a carpenter who walked with God, who developed godly convictions and communicated them with tender compassion in the context of time spent with the unique Son committed by God to his care.

Convictions without compassion creates distance in relationships. Compassion without convictions means weakness with regard to the truth, and will cause your kids to lose respect for you and for God. But put convictions and compassion together, combine them with time together over the years, and you have a succinct description of the man God chose to raise His Son. He was a dad for us to learn from, not just at Christmas time, but *a dad for all seasons*.

I encourage you in the coming year to commit yourself to spend time with God in His Word. It all starts there. You can't impart to your kids what isn't real for you. Ask God to make you a man of *biblical conviction*. But also, ask Him to develop in you a loving heart of *compassion*, and work on expressing it first toward your family. Take *time* to spend with your children. And your home will become the kind of home that God chose when He was looking for an earthly father to raise His unique Son.

Discussion Questions

1. How do parents know when to insist that their kids follow their convictions and when to wait for them to develop their own?
2. How do you keep godly convictions from crossing the line into unreasonable rigidity or legalism?
3. How can a man who has blown it get back on track with these qualities? Where does he start?
4. Are you strongest in the area of convictions or compassion? Set some goals for growth this year in your weakest area.

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