

Advent 2021 | Week 1 | Devotional 1

Righteousness and legalism are not synonymous. In Matt 1:19, we learn something about Joseph's character that makes all the difference. Joseph was righteous—he was faithful to the law of God. But Joseph was no legalist.

Legalism can be defined as a rigorous, rigid, checklist-like obedience to a set of rules and standards. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees characteristically interpreted God's law in this way. They were careful to follow every rule the law set out for them. Before his conversion, Paul was a Pharisee, and he was blameless from a legalistic standpoint. But he came to recognize this kind of checklist-obedience as ultimately different from righteous faithfulness.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Phil 3:4b-7

What separates legalistic obedience from righteous faithfulness? Is righteousness more lax? On the contrary! Jesus didn't tell his followers to bend the law. Rather, he called them to an *even higher standard* than the law required.

For 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.

Matt 5:20

So what then is the difference? The difference is a matter of the heart. *Why* are you obedient? What is your intention? What drives your behavior? Joseph was a righteous man, faithful to the law. But he wasn't faithful so

that he might boast in his own goodness. He wasn't faithful so he might get a reward. He wasn't faithful so that people would think well of him or God would love him more. No. Joseph understood *the heart of God*.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matt 9:10-13

God desires "mercy" or "compassion." His heart is full of love and a desire for the holistic well-being of every person—even those who have sinned against him. The law required Joseph to divorce Mary if she had slept with another man—and Joseph had every reason to believe this was the case in Matt 1:19. But he was NOT required to publicly disgrace her. He could instead divorce her quietly, with only a couple witnesses to the divorce— minimizing her shame without excusing her (he thought) sin against him.

Even in his pain at what he thought was Mary's unfaithfulness, he desired her good. He did not want to harm her more than was necessary. He desired mercy, not sacrifice; his righteousness surpassed legalism.

Questions for Reflection:

- 1. Consider a time you have been truly wronged. How did you feel toward the person who wronged you?**
- 2. What is your first instinct when you feel hurt or betrayed? What value is there in taking your time to respond rather than reacting in rage?**
- 3. When you think about Jesus' commands, do you seek to obey as one checking a box, or do you seek to understand and follow God's heart?**

Advent 2021 | Week 1 | Devotional 2

Joseph was open to God's interruption. Upon learning of Mary's surprise pregnancy Joseph made a plan. His plan was really pretty gracious, especially in light of what the culture and law required. But after Joseph had made his plan...

“But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1: 20-21

The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew's gospel is seen through Joseph's eyes; in Luke's gospel, we see it through Mary's. Scholar Ben Witter writes,

“As we read his story we see that his openness to God is one of his key attributes worth following. He is open to doing what the heavenly vision suggests, even though now it may cost him his reputation as a righteous man...This says something about his courage and faith in God.”

We see in Matthew 1 & 2 that God communicates with Joseph four times through dreams. Dreams in the ancient world were understood (for the most part) as means of divine communication.

God put Joseph in a position where he was totally dependent on direct divine revelation for the safety of his adopted son, Jesus. As a regular Joe this messy life was surely not what Joseph had planned. But often God's plan and his timing superseeds ours. God interrupted Joseph's plans so he could be part of God's far reaching salvation plan. Being the earthly Father of Jesus was an incredible privilege and also a glorious and messy interruption.

As the years progressed Joseph's attention to and obedience to God saved Jesus' life. In Matthew 2:13, he followed a dream which had a warning to flee

with his family to Egypt and escape the murderous Herod. When Herod died, Joseph received a dream to return. Finally, he obeyed a fourth dream to settle in Nazareth and avoid Herod's successor.

Questions for Reflection:

- 1. Plans can be a good thing. What plans have you made for this holiday season?**
- 2. Often life and God brings interruptions to our best laid plans. Generally how do you respond to interruption or a change of plans?**
- 3. How can you put yourself in a good position this holiday season to hear from God and receive His interruptions?**