

The Man God Chooses

The Righteousness of Joseph

Key verse: “Because Joseph her husband was *faithful to the law**, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

Matthew 1:19

*was a righteous man

Key Words:

Righteous: keeping the commands of God.

Merciful: not being selfish or vengeful; it is being compassionate

As followers of Jesus, how we respond to difficult news and situations matter. Joseph teaches us how to respond to news that we don't want to hear. His response to Mary helps us see why Joseph is the man God chose to be the earthly father of the Son of God.

According to marriage customs in ancient Judaism, the betrothal (engagement) of Mary and Joseph would have lasted a year and then the marriage ceremony would take place. A bride price called the *mohar* would have been paid by Joseph's father to Mary's father. A legally binding document called the *ketubah* (think of a modern day marriage license) was created during the betrothal and insured that the husband would provide for his wife. Upon signing the *ketubah* the betrothed couple would legally become husband and wife. However, the marriage could not be consummated until the actual wedding ceremony; but, if either of them slept with someone else during this period of time between engagement and marriage ceremony, they would be considered adulterers.

This takes us to the story of Joseph. He and Mary were not yet living together as husband and wife and yet she is pregnant. The only logical explanation to Joseph is that his bride had been unfaithful. Joseph, being a righteous man is left with few options in how he responds to Mary. Something had to be done. Joseph was faced with a dilemma.

Option 1: The Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 22:20-21, 23-24) states that the penalty for an engaged woman who cheats on her bridegroom before they are married should be brought to her father's house and stoned to death. However, it doesn't appear this penalty was practiced much during this time.

Option 2: Joseph could follow Jewish tradition and divorce Mary publicly. In this case, Mary would have stood in the public square to face questions about her faithfulness to Joseph. All the townspeople would be watching and judging her. Mary would be called out publicly as an adulteress. She would be humiliated and publicly scorned. However, Joseph wanted no part of this public humiliation of Mary,

Option 3: so he chooses option three, which speaks to the kind of man Joseph is. Matthew tells us that Joseph, “*did not want to expose her (Mary) to public disgrace, he had in mind to*

divorce her quietly (Matt. 1:19). Choosing this option would include quietly presenting Mary with a certificate of divorce in the presence of two witnesses (Deut. 19:15). In this moment Joseph tempers justice with mercy. He was righteous because he was obeying the law and divorcing Mary. But mercy trumps righteousness and in this moment Joseph did not want to place public shame upon her.

Think about what Matthew reveals about the character of Joseph in just these few words. Joseph had every reason to believe that he was wronged, that his bride had been unfaithful, yet despite all of this, despite his pain, Joseph pursued the heart of God by showing mercy to Mary. Remember, this was before he had a dream in which the messenger of the Lord appeared to him revealing the truth of Mary's pregnancy. Is it any wonder why God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of His son?

Table Time:

1. How can we be men like Joseph; to know what the right thing is and yet still show mercy?
2. Are you seen by others as a man of justice or are you seen as a man of mercy?
3. How does the mercy of Joseph change how you look at the Christmas story?