

**UPSIDE DOWN CHRISTMAS**  
**Part Two: Not Your Average Joe**  
**Pastor Rick Henderson**                      **December 14-15, 2024**

Our vision is to be a church of all cultures where curious, skeptical, and hurting people love to attend. It means the world to me that we get to be a safe place, a refuge for hurting people. Church is not a place for people who have it all together. Doesn't it feel good to be the body of Jesus? Doesn't it feel good to be used by him to be a place where goodness and healing can be experienced?

If you would say this is my church and these are my people, you are a part of that. This is why we invite you to pray with us, participate with us, serve with us, give financially with us. It is the thrill of a lifetime to gather together and join Jesus in his mission.

(Favorite picture from Big Boxes)

I want to welcome you to week 2 of our series, Upside-Down Christmas. Grab a Bible and find Matthew 1. The Bible is divided in two parts. The Old Testament is everything before Jesus. The New Testament begins with the arrival of Jesus.

As we read what we're going to read, I've got a hard task for you. Let go of sentimentality. Let go of all the familiarity you have. Do your best to read like you're reading it for the first time. Let yourself imagine that this was happening to you.

**MATTHEW 1:18-25** *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 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. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Charlie Dates is a pastor from Chicago who I've come to respect. After reading this passage to his congregation, he said this.

*God reserves the right to do the unexpected, the unique, and the surprising in your life.*  
–Charlie Dates

If you're a church person, that shouldn't be a shocker. Being a fully devoted follower of Jesus begins by recognizing him as the authority. Knowing that is one thing. But getting it can be something altogether different. God reserves the right to the unexpected, the unique, and the surprising in your life. How do you feel about that?

**QUESTION:** Are you **happy** for Jesus to show up in your life and exercise his sovereign authority so that your plans get flipped upside down?

How you and I answer that question may draw a line between us being fans of Jesus vs. followers of Jesus. Your responses and my response have the potential to reveal if we've given our admiration to Jesus vs. our allegiance to Jesus.

If it's not clear to you already, I'm inviting you to give your allegiance to Jesus. I want to persuade you to trust Jesus. And yet, if you hang with me today and really lean into where this is going—you might feel like I'm trying to talk you out of following Jesus. For those of you who wouldn't consider yourself a follower of Jesus, you picked a great day to come to church. The implications of what it would mean for you to trust and follow him might be clearer than ever before. I might end up talking you out of it. For those of you who already follow Jesus—too late. You're in.

**MATTHEW 1:18** *His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was **found to be pregnant** through the Holy Spirit.*

**[Pointing to "Holy Spirit"]** They didn't know that part. On this side of it, we have details that they didn't. Mary's friends, family, and fiancé didn't know God did something miraculous. All they could see was the scandalous. They didn't know God supernaturally caused life to grow in her womb but with absolutely no sexual activity involved. All they knew was that she couldn't fit into her wedding dress anymore. She was showing.

I'm asking you to put yourself in Joseph shoes. What do you think it was like to be him? This is what you need to know. Engagement was just as serious, just as binding as being married. They didn't live together, and they didn't sleep together until after the wedding. In case you don't know, that's not a quaint, traditional idea. That's God's command. That's God's design for human flourishing. All sexual activity is reserved exclusively for one man and one woman, in the covenant of marriage, bound to each other for life.

That was Joseph's expectation. It was the expectation of the family and the community. Now she's showing and he knows he had nothing to do with it. What are some understandable feelings he might have?

## UNDERSTANDABLE EMOTIONS

- Anger
- Heartbroken
- Jealous
- Disillusioned
- Resentful
- Rejected
- Disrespected
- Betrayed

Do you know what's so devastating about betrayal? It can only be done by a friend. An enemy can't betray you. Only a friend can do that.

What do you think are some understandable actions on Joseph's part? How would you respond? I'm not asking you what's right or wrong. This isn't about what's valid or justified. Instead, what kind of responses would be understandable?

## UNDERSTANDABLE ACTIONS

- Have a blowout argument.
- Try to make her feel shame and regret.
- Divorce her publicly.

At this time and in this culture, her pregnancy would have been the cause of shame. Remember that their dominant framework is different from ours. We live in an individual-based culture of guilt/innocence. They lived in a family-based, honor/shame culture. Because of the shame this brought to her, her family, Joseph, and his family—the expectation would be that he divorce her and make a public spectacle out of it.

Do whatever it takes to make sure everyone knows he's in the right, and she's in the wrong.

Did you know that there isn't a single word from Joseph recorded in the New Testament? He's a silent character in the history of Jesus' arrival. And yet, his example of grace speaks loudly, echoing to us today.

**MATTHEW 1:19** *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.*

The authority of God over his life and the ways of God for his life all meant a great deal to him. Joseph was the kind of guy described in Psalm 1. He delighted in the law of God. And when you delight in the law of God, your life will be like a \_\_\_\_\_? A garden.

- Joseph understood that the law of God could not be reduced to RIGHT BELIEFS and RIGHT BEHAVIOR.
- Joseph understood that the whole point of the law is to love God with all of who you are and to love all others as yourself—even your enemies.
- Joseph understood that love covers a multitude of sins.

There is no doubt that this would have deeply grieved him. The way he responded to the one he believed betrayed him was like one whose life was a garden. He models love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. He modeled grace.

Can I give you a way to think about the differences between religion and the gospel?

### **[Period]**

Religion fixates on what you do or don't do. End of story. Full stop.

### **[Semicolon]**

The gospel means good news. Do you know what the good news is? There's more to it than what you did or didn't do. There is more to the story. There is grace for all and any who will receive it.

Joseph emerges as more than Mary's husband and Jesus' adoptive father. Those are meaningful roles to be sure. Joseph is an ambassador of grace. He gets it. He was faithful to the law. Faithfulness to the law of God produces abundant peace and grace and never ever results in harshness.

Not only was Joseph gracious, but he also never threw a pity party, tantrum, or complained to God, "I did it all right, and it turned out all wrong. You owe me better than that." We don't hear that from him. Instead, his response to this situation is impressive. What might Joseph have known that we need to know?

Our spiritual maturity will never outpace our **EMOTIONAL** maturity.

A life of devotion to Jesus can't be reduced to the right beliefs and right behavior. It can't be reduced to religious activity. One of the shocking messages of the Old Testament is that God always desired mercy over religious activity. That means that we must get honest and get serious about fears, resentments, disappointments, sadness, and all the very real emotions that can disrupt our ability or willingness to love others—even people who hurt or betray us. It's not just our beliefs and behaviors, but our full emotional lives need to be transformed.

There's something else that Joseph knew that we need to know. Practicing grace doesn't mean pretending sin isn't serious.

We must understand the difference between **DISCERNMENT** and judgment.

Joseph was a man of discernment, not judgment or condemnation. I get it, people can use a word in different ways. When I say judgment, I'm using it in the negative sense of being

judgmental or condemning another person. Our challenge is that at first glance, both discernment and judgment/condemnation look like the same thing. But they don't feel like the same thing, do they? You'll understand why they feel so different when you look under the hood.

<b>DISCERNMENT</b>	<b>JUDGMENT</b>
<p>That is wrong.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It violates love for you.</li> <li>• It violates love for others (including me).</li> <li>• It violates love for Jesus.</li> </ul>	<p>That is wrong.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm above you.</li> <li>• I'm afraid of you.</li> <li>• I don't love you.</li> </ul>

Discernment not only requires knowing the difference between what is right and wrong, it also requires knowing where to set your boundaries.

- What will you allow or not allow?
- What will you tolerate or not tolerate?
- What will you participate in or not participate in?
- What and who will you work with? What and who might you work against?

Refusing to be a person of judgment or condemnation does not mean bypassing the pain that sometimes comes with holding your boundaries. If you are going to be a person of discernment who faithfully and carefully holds your boundaries, there will be times that it will hurt. Either it hurts us, another person, or both. But here's the kicker. When we do so, we are never trying to hurt someone else. We never intend to punish, shame, or control another person.

I want to suggest that this is worth slowing down and thinking about for a long time. I sense that there might be more confusion than clarity on this. What I'm going to say next is my opinion. I think there's a sizable amount of broken thinking in American church culture on this subject. There is this idea that we demonstrate or prove our righteousness by boldly condemning the sins of other people.

That's the world's way. There is a term for that. It's called virtue signaling. That's not the way of Jesus for us. Please hear me. We must be able to distinguish between right and wrong, good vs. sin. We must be able to tell the difference, and we have to say it too. And yet, we don't judge, control, or shame people. We don't condemn. That's God's job and his job only. It's above our pay grade.

Sometimes, people have encouraged me to preach against a certain sin. There have been times when people have accused me of not preaching enough against a particular sin. Who knows, maybe they were right. There could come a time when you feel that way, too. If you ever sense that I'm too soft on a sin that you perceive is becoming more and more prevalent,

by all means, come and tell me about it. You have a blank check. Feel free to tell me what sins you'd like me to preach against.

If we ever have that conversation, I want you to know that I'm going to ask you to also give me a list of the sins you're struggling with most. And that's the list I'm going to start with first. What would it say about us if we wanted to make statements about the sins of other people, who may not even be in the room, instead of first getting honest about the sins of those of us in the room?

The more I study it, the more I think about it, the more in awe I am by the example of Joseph. He was faithful to the law of God. He was righteous, discerning, gentle, and kind. We don't see a hint of condemnation, shame, or punishment from him. Is it any surprise that this is the man that Jesus picked to raise him?

**MATTHEW 1:20** *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, **do not be afraid** to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

Earlier I said that this sermon may feel like I'm trying to talk you out of following Jesus. That's because if you humbly trust him as the authority of your life, he will eventually call you to do something that requires courage. Notice the message to Joseph leads with, "do not be afraid." What are some of the understandable fears that ol' Joe may have had?

### **UNDERSTANDABLE FEAR**

- Sticky suspicion
  - Community
  - Friends
  - Her family
  - His family

For the rest of his life, he will never be able to prove their doubts and suspicions wrong. He'll never be able to prove the virtue of his wife or that he didn't do anything wrong himself. Some of us may know this from experience. When someone makes an accusation against you, even if there is no evidence, even if you can prove it's not true—it just sticks around. There will be folks who never let you wipe it completely off. It was the same way here. Many years later, when Jesus showed up in his hometown, do you know what they called him? The son of Mary. That was a way of shaming him. You don't know who your daddy is. It was cruel.

What do you think? Did living with that takes guts and strength? I think so.

**MATTHEW 1:21-25** *"She will give birth to a son, and **you are to give him the name** Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place **to fulfill** what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call*

him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **But he did not consummate their marriage** until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

All of this took place to fulfill what had been promised through a prophet. Will you let the weight and implication of this hit you like it must have hit Joseph? This is bigger than you. Your marriage and your parenting are not about you. This includes you. This will bring an indescribable blessing to you. But it's not about you. There's something much bigger at play.

If you've been around for a bit you've heard me talk about identity. It's the story you tell yourself about yourself. What is that that story? What if following Jesus, what if devotion to him means that we aren't the main characters in the stories of our lives?

Notice that Joseph doesn't get any say in when the baby arrives. He gets no say in how the baby arrives. He gets no say in naming the baby. Let's keep zooming in, he marries her and submits to all of this, even with the condition that he doesn't get to be with his wife until after the birth and then a 40-day waiting period after that.

It's not my intent to be crass or explicit. Rather, can we see this for what it truly is and be inspired by this man's devotion to the plans of God and death to his own desires, plans, and expectations? The call of Jesus to you and to me is to take up our cross, to die to ourselves, and follow him.

Let's do some discernment together. In my years as a pastor, I've observed that it's become normal for church folks and couples to disregard Jesus' commands and intent for sex. It's become so normal it feels weird to be asked to marry a couple who is waiting to get married before having sex. For whatever reason, many couples in church have become casual in disregarding devotion to Jesus in this major area of life.

So, if you are a Christian, and you are having sex with someone you're not married to, I don't care if you're engaged, this is my question. What does it mean to follow Jesus in this area of your life? Right now, you are following you, not him. What did Joseph know that you need to know?

My goal today is not to inspire you to follow the example of Joseph. My goal is not to inspire you to dig deep and simply try harder. My goal is for you to see and discover and become enthralled with Jesus. He once told a story about a guy who found a hidden treasure in a field. So the guy went and bought that field, even though it cost him all that he had because the treasure was worth it.

Is Jesus a treasure to you? This is a question that only you can answer. Is there anything that's more valuable to you than him. If you decide to follow him. If you decide to put the weight of your life on him and give him your allegiance—I don't know what it will cost you. I don't know

if it's going to cost you a relationship. I don't know if it's going to require you drawing a boundary. I don't know if it's going to require a major lifestyle change. I don't know what the cost will be, I just know there is one. It's dying to ourselves so that we can live for him. Whatever that cost maybe it's nothing compared to the treasure of Jesus.

**MATTHEW 1:21,23** *"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins...and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

What could be better news than God stepping into the human story, saving us from our sins, and being with us. He may flip it all upside down, but that's the only way we're going to be right-side up.

Remember a few minutes ago when I put this on the screen? **[Semicolon]**

Without Jesus stepping into our story, saving us from sin, and being with us—anything and everything that comes before this **[Semicolon]** is all there is. There's just what we do and don't do. It's been my experience that even if we have very different standards of right and wrong—none of us successfully live up to our own standards.

**[Pointing to the left side]** We are all far more guilty and sinful and morally messy than we ever dare admit; **[Pointing to the right side]** in Christ we are far more loved, forgiven, and delighted in than we could ever dare hope.

When we can see the treasure that he is, there is nothing we won't give up or turn away from so that we can have him—God with us.