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Outlaws For In-laws

Matthew 1:1-17

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The Christmas season is full of surprises.

A lady was preparing her Christmas cookies. She heard a knock at the door. She went to find a man, clothes tattered, obviously looking to make some money. He asked her if there was anything he could do.

She said, "Can you paint?" "Yes," he said, "I'm a rather good painter." "Well," she said, "there are two gallons of green paint there and a brush, and there's a porch out back that needs to be painted. Please do a good job. I'll pay you what the job is worth." He said, "Fine. I'll be done quickly."

She went back to her cookie baking until there came another knock at the door. There he stood, green paint on his clothes. "Did you finish the job?" "Yes." "Did you do a good job?" "Yes," he said. "But lady, there's something I should point out to you. That's not a Porsche back there. It's a Mercedes."

All sorts of surprises come at Christmas. Presents you didn't expect to receive, people you didn't expect to see, cards you didn't expect to get. Bills you tried to forget. It's been said, "Anyone who doesn't believe Christmas lasts all year doesn't have a charge card."

To me, the greatest surprise of Christmas is waiting to be discovered in the most unlikely place—the genealogy of Jesus, where we find outlaws for in-laws. This morning I want to show you the incredible hope this neglected part of God's word offers us. To find it, we need to answer three questions.

Why a genealogy?

First, why a genealogy? When reading the New Testament, everyone skips the "begats." It's about as heartwarming as a phone book—Jeconiah began Shealtiel and Shealtiel begat Ralph. Unless you're concerned about the pedigree of your dog or cat, you probably don't care much about genealogies.

But the ancient Jews did. This was how they always began their biographies.

You see, the ancient Jews were extremely concerned with racial purity. Matthew is writing to prove to the Jews that Jesus is their Messiah, and so the first question he must answer is, was he a pureblooded Jew, someone who could trace his lineage to Abraham?

And Matthew must also prove that Jesus was descended from King David, for this was required in the Scriptures as well (2 Samuel 7:16). If he doesn't provide this proof at the very beginning, his Jewish reader would go no further.

Matthew made his case so well, the enemies of Jesus never thought of using his racial lineage to disprove his claims.

Note that this pedigree was so important, Matthew wants his reader to memorize it. And so he arranges it in three groups of fourteen, a common Jewish number for lists. He must exclude a number of names to do so, again a common Jewish custom. He gives us only the most essential names, listing each one intentionally.

And so Matthew goes out of his way to be honest, including such immoral failures as Rehoboam, whose pride led to civil war; Jehoram, who killed his own brothers upon assuming the throne; Ahaz, who led Israel into child sacrifice; and Manasseh and Jeconiah, who lost the kingdom to Babylon. Outlaws for in-laws.

And worst of all, in this crucial, edited, intentional list, Matthew does the unthinkable—he includes women. Jews just didn't do this. Women had no legal rights. They were considered property, not people, the possessions of their fathers or husbands. In his regular morning prayer, the typical Jewish male thanked God every day that he had not made him a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

What a list! Outlaws for in-laws, indeed.

Why *this* genealogy?

And so we arrive at our second question: why *this* genealogy?

I once heard about a man who decided to read through the entire New York City residential phone book. Two weeks later a friend asked, "How's it going?" The man responded, "There's a whale of a cast, but not much plot."

Let's look for the plot. Why this genealogy? If Matthew wanted to include women, he could have listed Sarah, or Rachal, or Rebekah, all venerated matriarchs of the faith. But instead he gives us four of the most scandalous names in all of Jewish history. Why?

Fact number one: these women were *foreigners*.

Tamar was a Canaanite (Genesis 38:1-6). Rahab was a Canaanite in Jericho (Joshua 2:1). Ruth was from Moab (Ruth 1:4), a land especially despised by the Jews (Deuteronomy 23:3). Bathsheba was married to a Gentile, which made her one in Jewish eyes (2 Samuel 11:3).

Remember how the Jews hated the Gentiles, and thanked God that they were not Gentiles. They wouldn't go into Gentile homes, or eat Gentile food, or help Gentile women bring Gentile babies into the world. They despised them as unclean and pagan. They were aliens, foreigners, outsiders.

Have you ever felt that way? Are you on the outside of life today? New to Dallas, or to our church, or to your circumstances right now? Maybe you've got problems no one knows about, and you wonder if anyone cares. There are many ways to be foreigners today.

Jesus understands. He died alone and forsaken outside the city walls. He knows what it is to feel abandoned and lonely. And now he wants to receive you into his family, to give you a home and a place, to meet you where you hurt.

Matthew included foreigners, because foreigners are always welcome in Jesus' family.

Fact number two: there are *failed families* here.

Tamar's husband had died. Consistent with their customs, her father-in-law Judah gave her his next son as her husband, but he died as well. So Judah promised her his third son when he grew up, but later refused to keep his word.

So Tamar dressed as a prostitute, seduced Judah, and bore twin boys by him. And the incredible fact is, one of these twins was Perez, a distant grandfather of Jesus. The product of a dysfunctional, failed family.

Does anyone here identify with her? When half our marriages end in divorce, and a quarter of our babies are born to unwed mothers, I'd be surprised to meet anyone here today not touched in some way by family failure.

But Jesus understands. His mother was a virgin, but society didn't believe that and gossiped about her and him all his life. Jesus helped failed families, such as the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus understands, and can help.

Several years ago I met a young couple who told me how grateful they were to God that he had healed their marriage. Later I learned the whole story. They had married and moved to work on his father's ranch. The wife had an affair with her father-in-law, and became pregnant by him. And her husband, through a long process of counseling and Christian reconciliation, agreed to raise his half-brother as his son. Jesus healed their family.

Matthew included Tamar because failed families are always welcome in Jesus' family. Fact number three: there are *failed lives* here.

Rahab was a prostitute. Bathsheba was in some ways the most notorious woman in the Old Testament. Yet they're included. Why? Because Jesus "came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). He came to save embezzlers and thieves, and cheats, zealots, terrorists, and murderers. He came to save thieves dying on crosses. He came for sinners like them, and like us.

Matthew included Rahab and Bathsheba because failed lives are always welcome in Jesus' family.

Fact number four: there are *forgotten people* here as well.

Some of these names are famous—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon. But nine are found nowhere else in Scripture. And notice the last name on the list: Mary. The greatest unknown of all.

Every night Jewish girls prayed that they might become the mother of the Messiah. But everyone expected this to happen to a girl in the palace, or the daughter of a high priest. No one expected a peasant teenager living in the hills of Galilee.

But Jesus chose to live in those country hills, and save the world as a humble carpenter and itinerant rabbi. He loves us all, whether the world knows us or not.

Matthew includes Mary because forgotten people are always welcome in Jesus' family.

Are you in the family?

Let's say you were to nominate George W. Bush for president, and John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald were in his family tree. Would you mention them?

That's essentially what Matthew does here—outlaws for in-laws, indeed. All to prove that Jesus accepts us all.

And here's the even more astounding fact: Jesus not only accepted them—he *chose* them. He was the only baby in human history who chose his family. And he chose this family.

Now comes the most important question: are you in his family? Have you asked Jesus for eternal life? Have you accepted his forgiveness for your sins, his offer of heaven?

You can, today. And you can be part of God's genealogy, where human blood is replaced by Jesus' blood.

If you're in the family, what are you doing to help someone else join you? Who needs your forgiveness and acceptance? What "foreigner" do you know? What failed family can you touch? What failed life can you bless? What forgotten person would you remember today?

And if you're in the family, know that you're in forever. We forget our genealogies after a short time. You may remember your grandfather or possibly your great-grandfather, but who can go back further? One day we'll all be memories, then names in a Bible, then forgotten entirely, by everyone but God. Your name is in his book of life, forever.

Conclusion

It's been said that modern people are looking for three things: home, help, and hope. I believe that. Jesus offers you all three, today. If he would choose outlaws for in-laws, he chooses you and me. We can be in his genealogy, his family, right now.

Tim Kerlee was a seventeen-year-old student at Texas A&M University. An Eagle Scout, student athlete, and member of the National Honor Society, he placed out of his entire freshman year at A&M. Above all, Tim Kerlee was a passionate Christian.

Tim was on the bonfire stack when it collapsed on November 18. His pelvis was crushed, his arm was broken, and his internal organs were so badly damaged the doctors couldn't save him. But he refused to let rescuers take him off the stack until he had directed them to the other students, helping at least five survive. The rescuers later commented on the amazing peace he had in the midst of such pain and turmoil.

And he refused to stay on life support when he knew he was dying. He told his parents, why should he fight for a few more days of life when he could be in heaven right now with Jesus? That's where he is, today.

Why? Because Jesus was on that bonfire stack with him. And on yours as well. He chooses outlaws for in-laws, so he chooses us. Do you choose him?