

# What's With the Tables?

## Matthew 1:1-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 3, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup>An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup>and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup>and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup>and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

<sup>12</sup>And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup>So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew 1:1-17, NRSV)



Aminadab. Uzziah. Zerubbabel. Azor. What comes to mind when I say these names? Christmas? I doubt it. This time of year we always turn to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel to rehearse the Christmas story, a story we expect to include more familiar figures like Mary and Joseph, and the angels, and the wise men. In fact, we usually skip over the first names Matthew records, though this is the beginning of the Christmas story as he tells it. Let's not make that mistake this year. It's his story after all.

Matthew's Gospel opens with these words: "**An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah...**" In the original Greek it literally reads, "**The book of generations of Jesus...**"<sup>1</sup> 42 generations in Jesus' family tree, all the way back to the origins of Israel itself. But this is not just a genealogy. This is a résumé, though certainly not the type of résumé we use in our day. In our day your résumé is a virtual highlight reel of your life, all your educational and vocational achievements, all your brightest characteristics and skills, the names of the people in this world who will say the most complimentary things about you. Your résumé is mostly about what you have done and what you are capable of doing.

By contrast, in the ancient world, which was far less individualistic and far more family-oriented and communal, your résumé was your family, those to whom you belonged, the people from whom you came.<sup>2</sup> So understand what it is Matthew is doing here. As he begins his account of Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection, he makes some astounding claims about the identity of this man. He calls him the Messiah, the long-awaited Anointed One, the one for whom Israel has been waiting all these years to come and deliver them. To back up his claim he offers Jesus' résumé.

Essentially what we have here is a concise summary of the entire Old Testament, from Abraham, who shows up in Genesis 12, all the way up to the birth of Christ. It's another clear reminder that we will not be able to understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament, the Christian Gospel apart from Israel. Matthew organizes the names in three groups of 14. Study the list and compare it to the Old Testament record and you'll see that he leaves some names out. While every name here is historical, and a part of Jesus'

<sup>1</sup> <https://studybible.info/IGNT/matthew%201>

<sup>2</sup> I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2016), 29.

ancestry, Matthew is clearly less interested in putting together a complete family record, and more interested in offering an overall theological summary of God's redemptive work which has preceded this moment.

New Testament scholar Dale Bruner points out that the three sets of 14 form what he calls a leaning capital "N". At the beginning God makes this bold covenant with Abraham: **"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."**<sup>3</sup> Then, for 14 generations, from Abraham to David, the Lord moved Israel upward towards fulfilling his promise, making Israel a great nation with a great king. The time following David, however, was marked by disobedience and rebellion, and so the next 14 generations move downward in danger and judgment, ultimately ending in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. Finally, the last 14 generations move back upwards as the Lord moves history from Exile toward hope and fulfillment of his covenant in the coming of Jesus, who is the Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

Do you see it? Even this genealogy speaks to the heart of the Christian gospel, which Matthew is about to bear witness to in detail. God initiates relationship with us. We rebel and face judgment. But God keeps faith through it all and responds with grace to forgive and restore. What is also clear is that Christ is the focus and culmination of the whole story. Everything beforehand has been leaning towards this climax, the birth of the one who will finally come and set all things right. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council declared, "The Church believes that...in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point, and the goal of all human history." God's timing in all this was certainly not what anybody would want or expect. It never is. Nevertheless, his timing is perfect. In fact, 7 is the Hebrew number which represents perfection and completeness. 14 is therefore perfection multiplied, ultimate perfection.<sup>5</sup> What a résumé!

Now, it's not uncommon in our day for people to fudge on their résumés. If you get fired from your last job because you kept sleeping in and showing up late, you don't highlight that fact when you apply for your next job. If a previous boss labeled you as the worst employee she had ever hired, you don't list her as one of your references. A similar thing happened in those days. Jewish culture set the greatest possible value on

purity of pedigree. If it was discovered that you had non-Jewish ancestors, for example, meaning you had any mixture of foreign blood in you, you could lose your right to be called a Jew, and your right to enjoy all the privileges of that society. So people would fudge on their family trees, leave out certain incriminating branches. It's well documented that King Herod ordered the official registers of his ancestry destroyed so that nobody could prove a purer pedigree than his own.<sup>6</sup>

What is strikingly unusual here is that Matthew also fudges on Jesus' résumé, but seemingly with the opposite goal in mind. Instead of trying to highlight the members of Jesus' lineage who would be considered the most impressive and admirable to others in that day, he instead highlights the people who would have been considered the most shameful, the blackest of the black sheep.

Most notable, of course, is the fact that Matthew includes five women in this list. In ancient patriarchal societies, women were virtually never included in one's genealogy, and only added if their names would ensure the purity of the line or somehow enhance its dignity. Women in those days had no legal rights, and were regarded not as people but things, the possession of either fathers or husbands. A common prayer in those days among Jewish men was, "Thank you Lord that you have not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."

To add insult to injury, not only does Matthew include women, but he includes women who were racially and morally suspect in Jewish culture. Rahab and Ruth are definitely Gentiles, and a good case could be made that the same is true of Tamar and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah mentioned in verse 6. And in terms of moral standing, Tamar once played the harlot to trick her father-in-law into keeping his promise.<sup>7</sup> Rahab was a prostitute and a traitor to her own people.<sup>8</sup> Even Mary was scorned for being pregnant and unmarried at the same time.

In any respectable Jewish résumé, these figures were gender outsiders, and racial outsiders, and moral outsiders. These were unclean people who would not be allowed into the tabernacle or temple to worship, in fact were considered to be excluded from the very favor and presence of God. And yet, here they are showing up prominently in Jesus' family tree, his résumé set forth to give legitimacy to the claim that he truly is the Messiah. As Dale Bruner puts it, "One gets the

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:2-3. Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2007), 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo (Zondervan, 2006), 1134.

<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), 12.

<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 38.

<sup>8</sup> See Joshua 2.

impression that Matthew pored over his Old Testament until he could locate the most questionable liaisons possible in order to insert them into his record and so, finally, *to preach the gospel* even in his genealogy.”<sup>9</sup> And to further his point, he leaves out the model matriarchs of Jewish history, women he could have included like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. They are conspicuous by their absence.

Don’t miss the point. It’s perhaps summed up by the old song many of us learned as kids in Sunday school. “Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide.” This fountain is the love and grace of God that we see most clearly embodied in Christ, his Son. Your pedigree doesn’t matter to God. Others in this world may exclude you or look down on you because of it, but not Christ. It’s not the good people who are in, and the bad people who are out. That’s not the gospel. Matthew arranges Jesus’ family tree in such a way to make this clear at the very beginning of the story. Can you believe this is true? It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter what you have done or not done. It doesn’t matter where you have been. It doesn’t matter what you bring with you. If you turn to Christ you will find that there is space for you in his family.

This doesn’t mean that we are worthy of inclusion. We are not. In fact, it’s not just the women on this list who are suspect, but every name. Even towering figures like Abraham and David are suspect. Abraham twice was willing to offer up his own wife to other men to save his own skin. David was an adulterer, a liar, and a murderer. Some of us prayed Psalm 130 this past week. Verse 3 declares, **“If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?”** What’s the answer? Nobody can stand. And yet the psalmist continues, **“But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.”**<sup>10</sup> We are all equally sinful and lost, but also equally accepted and loved. Jesus is not ashamed to call us family.<sup>11</sup> As American priest, Raymond Brown, once put it, “The God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of those lines are our own lives and witness.” The people Jesus came from are the people Jesus came for.

All this, of course, is vividly evidenced in the rest of the story Matthew tells. In fact, one of the reasons why the Jewish leadership, and much of the Jewish populace, ultimately wanted to see Jesus dead was because he kept including all the wrong sorts of people. I can’t help but think of the story Matthew retells in chapter 9, the

story of the time Jesus called him to be his disciple. Matthew, remember, was a tax collector. Talk about the wrong sort of person! Tax collectors were Jews who betrayed their own people to work for the hated occupiers from Rome to collect unjust taxes and skim some off the top to line their own pockets. Nobody was more hated in those days than tax collectors. And yet, Jesus includes one in his inner circle.

In response, Matthew throws a party at his house for Jesus and invites all his friends. Of course, his only friends were other tax-collectors and sinners. Trash only hangs out with other trash. Unless, of course, you’re Jesus, who gladly sits down to share a meal with these people. As you may know, this was no small thing. In the ancient world, table customs were identifying marks, almost like a résumé. A Near Eastern proverb from that time put it this way, “I saw them eating and I knew who they were.” If I eat with you it means that I fully accept you. This is why, by the way, even in the early church believers were commanded to avoid table fellowship with those who claimed to follow Christ but intentionally lived lives of sinful hypocrisy. Paul writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:11, **“Do not even eat with such a one.”** This is why food and tables are so central to the biblical story.

Here is Jesus engaging in the intimate act of breaking bread with the worst of the worst. Immediately it divides the room. The seriously religious Pharisees present that day cannot believe what they are seeing, saying to Jesus’ disciples, **“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”**<sup>12</sup> This wasn’t the only time, of course. This sort of thing happened all the time, so much so that one of Jesus’ nicknames was “a friend of sinners.” It was not meant as a compliment. I have to imagine he took it as one anyway. For just as Matthew seems to go out of his way to include the most unlikely candidates in Jesus’ résumé, Jesus seems to go out of his way to include the most unlikely candidates around his table. Not just the rich, but the poor as well. Not just the oppressed, but the oppressor as well. Not just the noble, but the degenerate as well. The healthy and the sick. The citizen and the refugee. The respected and the scorned. The successful and the failures. The well-liked and the never-noticed. In other words, everybody. Jesus will share a table with anybody willing to share a table with him.

One of the enduring images of the holiday season is that of the table. Norman Rockwell captured this as well as anybody in this iconic painting. Christmas in particular is a time to



<sup>9</sup> Bruner, 9.

<sup>10</sup> New International Version (NIV).

<sup>11</sup> See Hebrews 2:11 – **“For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters...”**

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 9:11

include those you love around a table overflowing with good food, good drink, good conversation, good cheer. It's actually what makes this season so painful for so many of us, either because we have not been included around such a table, or because those who used to share the feast with us are no longer here.

I've talked about this many times before, but I think the most sacred piece of furniture in our house is the dinner table. That is probably the place in our house where I have felt most included. Often times these days it's just two of us at that table, which is different but also a gift. In the coming weeks the table will fill up again as my kids come home. In our family we have these different napkin rings, one for each person. My wife is very conscious of avoiding waste, so we usually use cloth napkins and the ring tells each family member which is their place. When our kids come back home in a few weeks, they will know their place by the rings. It's a symbol, really, that they belong in this family around this table.

When I travel back to Albania each year to teach in the Torchbearers School there, I always get to share at least one meal around the dinner table of my oldest friend, Mark. Some of you know that Mark has 16 children, 12 of them adopted. The table in his home is massive because it has to fit all of them when they are all home, in addition to whoever shows up for dinner, which in that house known for its hospitality is basically whoever wants to show up for dinner.

Here's a photo from the meal I shared at that table a few months ago. It includes a few other faces you might recognize. Technically, I'm not a part of that family. And yet, whenever I am there I feel the same level of inclusion and grace that I experience at my own table. Mark's kids even call me Uncle Jeff. It's remarkable. I feel like family. Whoever sits around that table feels like family. And I wonder, do you know that place of grace, that place of honor, that place which you do not deserve but are extended nonetheless?



It's not by accident that at the center of our worship space, and at the center of nearly every Christian worship space, is a table. We call this the Lord's Table, because Jesus is the host. It's his table. Do you know who it is that he welcomes to this table? He welcomes you. He welcomes anybody and everybody who will come and take the place that has been set for them. Not

everybody wants to come. It's understandable. To come is to give yourself to the Host, to place your life in his hands, to rely on the grace that is served here because you know you can't find it anywhere else. Lots of people stay away from this table because they'd rather prepare their own menu, serve themselves rather than be served by, and serve, Jesus. To come to this table is to also take a seat beside some questionable dinner companions, some of whom will consider you a questionable dinner companion. Lots of people stay away from this table because of the others Jesus has invited. Still, a place is set for them if they ever change their mind.

Last week I asked you to pay attention to the lights this season of Advent and Christmas, to let them remind you of the one who is the Light of the World who has come to dispel darkness which will never overcome. This week I want to ask you to pay attention to the table this season, both this one in the center of our sanctuary, and the one in the center of your home. As for this table, know that you are welcome here. The very beginning of the Gospel message makes this clear. Highlighted in Jesus' résumé is the fact that he welcomes people like you, whoever you are, whatever you have done or not done, wherever you have been. As long as you come in faith, you will find a place set for you, and a serving of grace which is much more than sufficient.<sup>13</sup>

I also want to ask you to pay attention to your own table, as I try to pay attention to mine. In spite of all we should have learned from Jesus by now, we still tend to include only certain kinds of people around our tables. Sometimes this could be because we really would rather not break bread with certain people. But most of the time, it's because the idea of doing so never crosses our mind. The Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once wrote, "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity, [to say], 'You don't matter. You don't exist. You don't belong.'"<sup>14</sup>

As you do your best this season to remember that Christ has included you around his table, how might you then in turn make an effort to include others around your table, others you might not otherwise include. Maybe this is your table at home, or a table elsewhere in a coffee shop, or a school cafeteria, or an office breakroom. If we are not intentional about this, it likely will not happen. So make plans today to set an extra space or two so that as grace has been received, grace will also be extended.

<sup>13</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:9 - "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

<sup>14</sup> Cited by David Brooks, *How To Know a Person* (Random House, 2023), 9.

I don't completely understand why this is, but clearly it is around tables where we meet Christ and experience the grace and salvation of God. The first thing God does for Adam and Eve in the garden is to give them a menu, the fruit of every tree (except one). The climax of the Exodus out of slavery in Egypt is a feast the Jews commemorated every year after at Passover. The prophet Isaiah promised a messianic banquet one day of rich foods that would never spoil and never end.<sup>15</sup> Jesus fed thousands of people lunch one day and there was more food left at the end than there had been at the beginning. Then on his last night on earth Jesus shared a supper with his friends and told them it was a taste of the coming kingdom of God. The Bible even ends with a feast, a wedding banquet in honor of Christ and his bride, the church.<sup>16</sup>

What a gift Matthew gives us at the beginning of his Gospel. Don't miss it in your rush to Bethlehem. Families are included around tables. Consider Jesus' family, those he includes around his table. Abraham and David, yes. But also Aminadab, Uzziah, Zerubbabel, and Azor, along with Tamar, and Rahab, and Bathsheba. And you. And me. And everyone you know, including those who have no idea they have been invited, and those who could never believe they would be included. As we find hospitality and a feast of grace around this table this season, may others find the same around our tables as well. If you trust Christ, or want to trust Christ, know that you are invited to come and share in this feast which he has prepared for all who come in faith.

Amen.



## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. How far back can you trace your family tree? Do you think of your ancestry as a sort of résumé?
2. Read Matthew 1:1-17. Don't worry about pronunciation. Be bold! As you read, see how many stories you can bring to mind which lie behind the names. Which name stands out to you?
3. Why is it significant that Matthew begins his account of his Gospel this way? What do you believe he is trying to communicate to his readers, including us?

4. At which time in your life have you felt most welcome and included around a table? From which table have you felt excluded?
5. Do you feel included around Christ's table, in his family? If so, how have you come to believe you are included? If not, what has led you to believe you are excluded?
6. Pastor Tim Keller once wrote, "Jesus' holiness cannot be contaminated by his contact with us. Rather, his holiness infects us by our contact with him." What does this mean to you? Do you believe it?
7. What is one way you might include others around a table this season, particularly others you might not normally consider including?
8. What is the main thing that Jesus is saying to you through this message? How will you allow that to change the way you think and live?

### Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



*Why is it important that we understand Jesus' family, as listed here in Matthew 1? What is God trying to teach us here?*

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 25:6

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 19. Also, I'm indebted here to Justin Taylor, "A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table", *The Gospel Coalition*, May 4, 2011. Read the full article online at