

A Lineage of Grace

The Gospels

Matthew 1:1-17

Introduction

The apostle Paul, as you may be familiar, gives an almost unbelievable challenge to us when he tells, in the book of Philippians chapter 2, some things about Jesus Christ. He then says, in Philippians 2:5,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (NASB)

Paul continues to explain, in even further detail, what we are supposed to model about Jesus Christ.

This is almost unbelievable because he is, in effect, saying that you and I are to reproduce in our lives, or we are to allow the Holy Spirit to reproduce through us, the life of Jesus Christ. This is the reason I call this an almost unbelievable challenge.

If I were to ask the average Christian – of course, I am not talking about you, since you are above average, I am talking about other Christians – to write on a piece of paper all that they know about Jesus Christ, I would get back a piece of paper with some facts and perhaps, a lot of hot air. The paper may have facts such as:

- He is the Son of God;
- He came from heaven to earth;
- He died on the cross to save the world, which He loved;
- He rose from the grave;
- He ascended into heaven.

All of these facts are correct and great to know. However, without meaning to sound too crass, my four-and-a-half year old boys have already learned these facts under the capable teaching of a Sunday school teacher.

What has, in the lives of those of us who know Christ, brought us along so that we now know something other than the basic, though beautiful, facts about Jesus Christ? Who is Jesus Christ and what do we know about Him that can cause us to model His life?

I believe, ladies and gentlemen, that we are living among a generation who model the life of Christ very little. I think the reason for this is that we know so little about the life of Jesus Christ. It is not because we lack great books, great conferences, conventions, counselors, sermons, Bible studies, Bible study groups, and all of that. It is, I am afraid, because we have gotten too far away from the basic question, “Who is Jesus Christ?”

Imagine that I told you of an amazing discovery I had made in an ancient manuscript. It prophesied the coming of a particular Englishman and now, for us to live a fulfilled, effective life, we must model the life of Winston Churchill.

You and I would immediately go to the library to check out *The Last Lion*, or any other biography on this man’s life. We would want to know everything we could about Winston Churchill.

We might then, begin to imitate him in many ways. We might dress in three piece suits with vests that look like they are waiting for a good sneeze to pop all the buttons. We might take an English course to brush up on our grammar and start staying up at night to write. We might even grab a fat cigar and start smoking – although I am not suggesting that! We might begin to smile a lot less in public. Why? So that we can model the life of Winston Churchill.

The interesting thing is that you and I have been commanded by God to change – and in that changing, to become more like Jesus Christ.

We will find in the gospels, as we begin this study, exactly what God intends to reproduce in your life and in mine. By submission to the Holy Spirit and by our study, I trust that we will come to the end of this series and see in our lives the reproducing qualities of Jesus Christ. Then we can begin saying, with the apostle Paul, “I am having this attitude in myself, by the grace of God.”

Grace Seen in the Life of Matthew

I invite your attention to Matthew chapter 1 today. However, before we get into Matthew, it will

be helpful to understand that one of the worst aspects of Roman domination was taxation. It was oppressive. It was relentless. It was ruthless. There were men in that day, who purchased from the Roman government the ability to tax the Jewish nation in Palestine. They would then hire Jewish men, called tax gatherers or tax collectors, to do their work for them.

There were several different kinds of tax collectors.

- There were the “Gabbai”.

These were men who collected fixed taxes; such as land, income, or poll tax. There was little deceit or graft by these tax collectors because the taxes were fixed amounts.

- There were also the “Mokhes”.

The “Mokhes” would tax everything else. They would set up their tax booths at major intersections in the land. If a Jew came with their donkey loaded with corn or wheat or whatever, they would be taxed on that. The Jews could not get past a tax booth without paying some money – and they hated it.

There were two kinds of “Mokhes”.

- There were the Great “Mokhes”.

These individuals cared a little, because they were Jews, about their reputation. They would hire someone else to do their work for them, and in so doing, would save their reputation to some degree. In fact, I am sure there were Great “Mokhes” living at that time, of which no one knew.

- There were also Little “Mokhes”.

These Jews were so greedy; so concerned about getting every possible penny that, discarding their reputation with their own people, they themselves sat in the tax booths.

It is fascinating to discover that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was a Little “Mokhes”. He was a man too greedy, too cheap, and too obnoxious to care what his fellow countrymen thought of him.

Turn to Matthew 9:9a, which is where we learn this fact about Matthew.

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; . . .

There Matthew was – that greedy Little “Mokhes” – taking every penny. There was no middleman for Matthew – he would get all he possibly could.

Continue to Matthew 9:9b.

*. . . and He said to him, “Follow Me!”
And he got up and followed Him.*

In that day, the tax collector was classed together with the murderer and the harlot. They were ostracized from the temple. So we find that the man who wrote the first compilation of Jesus Christ’s life, was a man who had given up worshipping Yahweh for money.

Yet, something happened on this day. Jesus Christ and His grace invaded Matthew’s life and said,

. . . “Follow Me!” . . .

Many things dramatically changed for Matthew.

We know, for instance, that his name changed. His name had been Levi, as recorded by Mark and Luke (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), but was changed by Jesus to Matthew, which means, “a gift from God”.

I love this name change. It is a sermon in itself. This was a man who was considered despicable by his own nation and people – and rightly so. Jesus Christ comes into his life and says, “You’re a gift from God to Me.”

Someone wrote that when Matthew got up from that tax booth, he changed careers. However, he did not really change careers, in that he left everything behind except his pen. Understand that most of the other disciples were fishermen and were unlearned. Matthew, however, had the ability to scribble on parchment. He took his quill with him and carefully, logically, systematically recorded the life of Jesus Christ for you and for me.

Matthew was also a man who obviously had a new character. I think he probably had been a very self-assertive individual – almost to the point of being obnoxious. This was a man who would stand up to someone, eyeball to eyeball, and defend his position. He did not care what anyone thought. This was Levi.

Christ then came into his life and we find a gospel in which this man only refers to himself in the third person. He never records even one word that he himself spoke. In fact, we would not know that Matthew wrote this gospel if it were not for early Christians who had scribbled that fact down and careful historians who attached this apostle to this book. I find this incredible.

Michelangelo, undoubtedly, was one of the greatest sculptors who ever lived. Many of his statues adorn the cathedrals of Europe. One day, he

overheard people ascribing his work on one of his statues to a rival artist. He was so incensed that he snuck into the church that night and carved into the base of the statue the words, “MICHEL ANGELUS BONAROTUS FLORENT FACIBAT,” which means, “Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence made this!” Everyone would know that Michelangelo did it!

We never find Matthew carving into this gospel, “Matthew did it.” There was a remarkable change in him. Why? Because of the grace of God and the work that Christ did in his life.

Grace Seen in the Genealogy of Matthew 1

Now turn to Matthew chapter 1, where Matthew will give what is called, a genealogy. It is probably the most boring passage in the gospel to us. However, in that day, it was probably the most exciting and the most startling reading of the entire gospel. Every Jew would probably discard the rest, but read the first 17 verses of Matthew chapter 1.

Why is this? Because Matthew 1:1 says,

***The record of the genealogy of Jesus . . .
the son of . . .***

Who?

. . . David . . .

I can see every rabbi coming out of his chair; every Sanhedrin who kept the records, sucking in his breath, thinking, “Wait! He is the son of David? He is from the line of David? Let’s check it out.”

We know from history, in fact, that the Sanhedrin kept the genealogies. They took great care of these because it was very important that every Jew knew from which tribe he came. They could not be a priest unless they could prove they were a descendent of Levi.

These genealogies were destroyed in AD 70, so in our day, no Jew knows to which tribe he belongs. It will be amazing to see what will happen in order for Christ to restore the Levitical system in the millennial kingdom.

The genealogies during Matthew’s time, however, were carefully guarded by the Sanhedrin. They were sacred and worth their weight in gold. The Sanhedrin were very careful in their care of them and would check Matthew’s genealogy.

Matthew recorded this genealogy in such a way that Jesus Christ lineage was never doubted and never

denied. It is beautiful the way Matthew ties in the Old Testament. In fact, he quotes more from the Old Testament than any other gospel writer.

Gerard Healy’s classic play, “The Black Stranger,” tells the story of Ireland during the famine in the 1800s. It talked about the fact that the government, without a better solution for the impoverished, desperate people, put men to work digging roads with no purpose and to no destination. The main character of this play, Michael, finally discovers this. He goes home one day and laments to his father, “Father, they are making us dig roads that lead to nowhere.”

When I read this, I thought of the Old Testament prophets, who, without the fulfillment of Jesus Christ given in the book of Matthew, would have been digging roads that led to nowhere. Yet, they found a wonderful destination in the purpose of Jesus Christ and His life.

It is interesting that the common people; the populace – not the Sanhedrin or the publican – never doubted or denied this genealogy because they checked it out. You may remember the time that Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The common people began to wave their “lulovs” or their palm branches at Him and began to shout what? They,

. . . were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David . . .” (Matthew 21:9a)

This little baby boy, that we are going to look at in the weeks ahead, lying in a crummy feed trough surrounded by smelly animals, parented by basically obscure, insignificant Jews, was the destination of the Old Testament. He was the rightful heir to the throne. In fact, if the throne had existed at the time of Jesus’ birth, Joseph would have been the king and Jesus would have been the next in line.

We will spend the rest of our discussion today, looking at this genealogy of a rightful heir. We will discover, in studying this, far more than simply a list of names – we will discover that this is a lineage of grace.

Grace in the three periods of the history of Israel

The genealogy in Matthew 1 can be divided into three sections. Each section has fourteen names as Matthew systematically records the lineage of Jesus Christ.

- The first section, in Matthew 1:2-6, is the period from Abraham to David.
- The second section, in Matthew 1:7-11, is the period from David to the Babylonian exile.
- The last section, in Matthew 1:12-17, is the period from the Babylonian exile to the time of Christ.

We discover in this that Matthew basically gives enough of a history lesson in these names to show us that in Israel there was a history of failure; a history of sin. The history of Israel was marred. There were periods of faithfulness, but for the most part, there was unfaithfulness; there were periods of purity, but for the most part, there were periods of great impurity. Yet, the grace of God reveals that He chose to continue to keep His promise to come to the Jewish nation and to literally, come through Jewish lineage.

Grace in the ancestry of Christ

God's grace is seen also in the ancestry of Christ. Let me give some interesting things from Matthew's genealogy.

There is the inclusion of women in this genealogy. In our time this is not unusual, but in that day, this was startling. The reason this was so unusual was unfortunately because during the time of Christ, a woman had no legal rights. A woman could not give testimony in a court of law. She could not inherit property. She was basically, the property of her husband. She was a beast of burden.

Jesus Christ, through the inspired writer, is giving His lineage and records the names of four women. It is strange because a woman could not testify in court and this is the testimony that He is the rightful heir. Yet, we find Jesus Christ giving nobility to women.

In that day, in fact, the orthodox Jewish man got up every morning and prayed a prayer. The prayer said, "I thank You, oh my God, that You have not created me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."

This was the day in which they lived.

Now, it would help, and this is another study, to understand how radical the teaching of Paul was. Paul said,

. . . husbands ought . . . to love their own wives as their own bodies. . . . (Ephesians 5:28a)

This was radical teaching because of the day in which he lived.

Knowing this may help us to better understand the startling impact that Matthew's genealogy must have made on the Jewish reader. Not only a woman, but four women's names are tied to rather questionable pasts and deeds. Let us note their names.

I received in my mail last month, a long letter telling me that if I sent in a certain amount of money, I would get the Davey genealogy. Perhaps you have received something similar. They sent a drawing of a seal that some guy probably made up. I did not subscribe to this offer, but I do know a little about the family tree that I came from.

One of the things that I treasure is the fact that, prior to my older brother and I, there have been seven successive generations of ministers. My brother and I represent the eighth. It goes back to a man who was the bishop of a Lutheran church. He is probably disappointed with me today, but that is how far back it goes.

Now, if I were going to write out my family tree, I am sure I would include those seven men. I would probably by-pass a relative of mine who lived a tragic life and whose sons, my cousins, have spent their lives in jail. I am admitting that I would probably leave their names out, but would include the names of the ministers.

Jesus Christ, in this genealogy, is presenting Himself to the Jewish nation as the rightful heir to the throne and He includes the names of people who have no legal rights and people with very questionable lives.

- The first woman, in Matthew 1:3, is Tamar.

We will not take the time to look at all the details of Tamar's story, but you may want to read it on your own. In Genesis 38, we are told that she married into the line of Judah. Her husband, the son of Judah, died. His brother, who she married to carry on the family line, also died. So she, desperate for a child, dressed herself as a temple prostitute and went out to where Judah was keeping the sheep at Timnah. He had relations with her and she conceived and bore twin boys. The grace of God, even in this, chose to continue the line. I would have switched it from Judah to Levi or Benjamin or someone else, but God's grace continues it right through the oldest boy, who had been conceived in such a way.

- The second woman, in Matthew 1:5, is Rahab.

Rahab was a little like Tamar, but, unlike Tamar, her prostitution was a profession. She ran a brothel on top of the wall of Jericho. We know her because of her great faith, in that she switched from pagan idolatry to observe and worship the monotheistic system of Israel. She chose to worship God and God preserved her. When the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, she survived. God, in His grace, had her actually marry into the line of Jesus Christ. She became the great grandmother of David.

How would you like this in your family tree? Would you include it? I doubt it.

- The third woman, in Matthew 1:5, is Ruth.

Ruth was a pagan Moabite who married an Israelite. This was against the Jewish law. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:3 tells us that no Ammonite and no Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord. That takes care of Ruth, right? No. You probably know the story that Ruth married Boaz and thereby became part of the line of Jesus Christ and became the grandmother of David.

The Moabites had an interesting relationship with Israel. In fact, the Moabites were created by the incestuous relationship of Lot with his unmarried daughters. Lot's daughters wanted to have a child, but were not married and had no brothers. They got their father, Lot, drunk and he unknowingly, had relations with them and they conceived. The oldest daughter had a son she named Moab. The Moabites became bitter enemies of Israel.

In this genealogy, Ruth is a Moabite in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. We might think, "What's He trying to do? Run everyone away?" No. He is trying to give them a new theme. He is trying to present Himself, not just as the rightful King, but as the King of grace.

- The fourth woman, in Matthew 1:6, is Bathsheba.

We read in Matthew 1:6,

Jesse was the father of David the king. David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah.

This is probably one of the darkest secrets of Israel's past, so why not keep it hidden? This is the great King David.

Let me tell a story about the genealogy of one particular wealthy woman.

A wealthy woman wrote to a well-known author and asked him to write a genealogy for her family. He agreed and began to compile the facts about the woman's family. In the process, he discovered that one of her near ancestors had been a murderer and was electrocuted at Sing-Sing. He told her of this and said, "I'm an honest man. I've got to include this in your genealogy."

She begged, "Please don't!"

He said, "Absolutely not. I will include it."

She finally said, "If you must include it, please write it in such a way that the truth that he was electrocuted at Sing-Sing is hidden."

The author agreed and when the book was finished, the woman read this quote about the relative, "One of her relatives occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America's best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and died in the harness."

This is the way we are; this is humanity. When we come to a story like the one involving David and Bathsheba, we say, "Shh, be quiet. Keep that under wraps."

However, it is as if God said, "Matthew, put in an editorial comment. Don't just skip over it."

Look again at Matthew 1:6b. It is as if our Lord is bound and determined to say it.

. . . David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah.

Our Lord gets it out into the open. Why? Is it because God winks at sin? Absolutely not. You may remember that their first baby died as a judgment from God. But Jesus is saying, "I'm not just a king, I'm the King of grace."

The key verse, I think, to this chapter, is Matthew 1:21,

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.

What has Jesus just done in the genealogy? He has said, "Israel is filled with sinners. But that's all right – I came to save the sinner because I am the One with grace."

Application

The application of this genealogy is, I think, very simple. It is this:

- If Jesus Christ is not ashamed of His ancestors, He will not be ashamed of His descendants.
- If Jesus Christ includes sinners among His ancestry, He will include sinners among His descendants.

This genealogy is nothing less than a declaration of grace to the world.

By the way, Jesus' genealogy is still being composed – His descendants are still being added every day. There is another name for it and that is, “the Lamb's book of life”. It is the only family tree I know of in which we can become members by invitation.

Yet, Jesus bestows His grace and says, as recorded in John 1:12,

... as many as received Him [Jesus, by His grace], to them He gave the right [the right!] to become children [descendants] of God . . .

It does not matter who you are or what you have done, there will come a day when Jesus Christ will open the book and He will take a last look at His lineage and His descendants. The most important thing is that you and I, by grace, are included. Sinners, yes, but included by the King of grace.