

A Not-So-Royal Lineage

Turn with me to Matthew 1. This morning we are kicking off a new teaching series—our first ever teaching series here in our new space (still stoked on that btw)—called *Not What You'd Expect*. And as you likely noticed on your bulletin on the way in, this is our Christmas series. And while it is still technically the week before *Thanksgiving* and might feel a bit early for a *Christmas* series, I know some of you guys started listening to Christmas music back in late August so I feel okay about starting a Christmas series.

But before we dive in to today's passage, I wanted to spend just a bit setting up the series as a whole. In this series, we're looking at just a few of the characters of the traditional Christmas story in the bible. Now, probably the overwhelming majority of us in the room have at least *some* familiarity with that story. If you grew up in church, you probably heard it every year around Christmas. Even if you didn't grow up in church at all, you probably are at least aware that for Christians, Christmas has something to do with Mary, with Joseph, and with a baby Jesus. That much, pretty much all of us know.

And the fact that most of us are *familiar* with the story is both an advantage and a *disadvantage* when it comes to us doing a series on it. It's an *advantage* because it means that I don't have to spend quite as much time unpacking all the details. Since it's familiar, I don't have to describe all of it at-length for you to grasp what's happening in the narrative. But it also works to our *disadvantage*, because **sometimes when we're familiar with a story, it loses some of its punch**. When we're familiar with a story, it tends to come across a bit stale. There's a popular saying out there, that "familiarity breeds contempt." And I don't know that *that's* always the case, but certainly familiarity can breed *apathy*, and *boredom*—it can make you exponentially less interested in what we're talking about.

And I think **specifically when it comes to the Christmas story, familiarity can breed sentimentalism**. We tend to airbrush this story and make it almost picturesque and "cute." We turn it into something reserved for really cheesy paintings and really awful greeting cards. And I think that's really unfortunate. Because **this story—the biblical story of Christmas—is anything but sentimental**. It's raw. It's subversive. It's *dangerous*. And it is—as our series title indicates—precisely *not* what you'd expect. And more than that, **I truly believe it has things to say about who God is and who we are that we desperately need to grasp and understand**. So our attempt for the next four weeks is going to be to unpack all of that. Make sense?

Okay. Now all of that being said, today *ironically*, we're going to be looking at the part of the story almost always gets left out: the genealogy. That's right: today we are going to look at the somewhat dry, very random list of ancient names that kicks off the book of Matthew. I just felt like that would get us all in the Christmas spirit, right? So for all of you have been on pins and needles wondering, '*when are we gonna get to do an in-depth study of a genealogy together?*' Today, all your wildest dreams come true. You're welcome.

But in all seriousness, let's be honest: most of us tend to just skim or skip over these parts of our bible right? The other day I came across a *different* genealogy in Genesis and I was like "okay, easy reading today!" [Check that one off the list]. Because it doesn't seem like a list of ancient names would have much bearing on our lives today. But I think especially with this one in Matthew, it very much does. And I want to try and show you today why I think that. Will you allow me to *attempt that* this morning? Thank you. And if nothing else happens, maybe some of you who want to have kids one day can glean some ideas for unique baby names. So let's take a look. Let's just read through the whole thing in its entirety, and then we'll go back and zoom in on a few things together. Matthew 1, starting in v. 1:

*[1] The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. [2] Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah **and his brothers**,*

"...and his brothers." Man, would hate to be those guys. Don't even get named at all—just "Judah...and those other jokers." Continuing in v. 3:

*[3] and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, [4] and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of **Salmon**—*

Now if you *are* here today and thinking through baby names, might I suggest to you branching out into names of *fish*? Just a thought. Might be an untapped market there. Anyway, v. 5:

*[5] and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, [6] and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**,*

Whoops—that doesn't sound great David. Continuing on, v. 7:

*[7] and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, [8] and Asaph the father of **Jehoshaphat** [okay seriously, if you're expecting a child, I have no idea why you're not writing some of these down], and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, [9] and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, [10] and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, [11] and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

Okay, everybody still alive? Good...because we're not done. Verse 12:

*[12] And **after** the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, [13] and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, [14] and Azor the father of Zadok (who obviously is one of the Pokemon—gotta catch 'em all), and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, [15] and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, [16] and Jacob the father of Joseph (here we go, should be in familiar territory here) **the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.** [17] So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.*

Mmm...can't you just practically smell the Christmas trees now? Nothing to get you in the spirit quite like a random list of ancient names, right? So, now that you've gotten a glimpse at the whole passage, what in the world is this about, and what does it have to do with you and with me? Those are fantastic questions.

First, let's start things off with maybe the most obvious question: *why* a genealogy? Why start off the Christmas story, and not only that but an entire book of the bible (Matthew), and not just any book, but the *first* book in the whole *New Testament*—with *this type* of passage? Well, it has to do with how people back then thought about themselves. *Today*, if we want to convince someone of our legitimacy, our competency, of our *worthiness*, we tend to use our *accomplishments*. When we're applying for a job, we bring a resume of the things we've *accomplished*. When we want to impress someone at a party, we try to ever-so-casually mention some of the things we're most proud of being

involved in. When we meet someone new, one of the first things we ask is "what do you (what?)" Do. In a lot of ways today, for better or worse, we define ourselves by what we have accomplished.

But back *then*, it was a little different. **People then defined themselves less by what they did and more by the family they came from.** If you wanted someone to think you were impressive, you wouldn't give them a *resume*—you would show them your *lineage*. You'd tell them about the family you *came* from. It was your way of saying "this is the stock that I come from." It's actually still this way in many parts of the world, even if it isn't in most of American society. But once you *know* that, **it might start to make sense of why, when we get introduced to the most important guy in the biblical story (i.e. Jesus), Matthew kicks things off by describing for us the family that Jesus comes from.** It's his way of saying "here's who Jesus is, here are his credentials, here's his legitimacy." It's a list of names that is meant to convince us of the stock Jesus comes from, and therefore of his rightful place as the "Messiah"—this long-awaited king of Israel.

Here's how biblical scholar and pastor N.T. Wright describes the way that this genealogy would've read to ancient ears:

For many cultures ancient and modern, and certainly in the Jewish world of Matthew's day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, a fanfare of trumpets, and a town crier calling for attention. Like a great procession coming down a city street, we watch the figures at the front, and the ones in the middle, but all eyes are waiting for the one who comes in the position of greatest honor, right at the end."

This is **what Matthew was doing: he was giving a long, drawn-out, dramatic, royal introduction to Jesus, to show his readers just how legitimate Jesus was.** But—to be honest—that's where it starts to get a little *weird*. Because this is not your *ordinary* genealogy. There are at least a few things in *this* genealogy that are *very* odd for Matthew to include if that's what he's doing. Things you wouldn't expect at all from a genealogy of this time period. For starters, there are *women* in this genealogy. Now, *I'm* a huge fan of including women in genealogies, and Matthew evidently is too, but you need to understand most other people in Matthew's *society* didn't feel that way. In a patriarchal culture like the one Matthew inhabited, women were virtually *never* included in listing out ancestry lines. But Matthew includes *several* women in his genealogy—*five* of them, to be exact.

Now, what's even more peculiar is *which particular* women Matthew chooses to include. First off, the majority of these women were *Gentile*, not Jewish, in ethnicity. In a society that often prided itself on the ethnic "purity" of their family tree, people who were of other ethnicities were generally omitted from the genealogy because they didn't help your cause. Matthew doesn't seem to be interested in omitting them at all. In fact, he goes *out of his way* to *include* them.

But there's even more to this. For instance, you might be thinking, "okay, but why not mention the women in *every* generation? Why only mention *five* of them?" Which is a valid question...because if you know anything about biology, turns out it actually takes a man *and* a woman to produce a child in *every* generation. So why only mention five of them here? Well, it seems like it's because **Matthew is trying to draw our attention not only to these specific women's identities, and not only to their ethnicities, but also to their stories.** So let's find out who the women in Matthew's genealogy are:

- **Tamar** (in v. 3) is connected to Judah—that's what it says: "Judah the Father of Perez and Zerah *by Tamar*." But fun little fact: Judah was not Tamar's husband, or boyfriend, or bae. Judah was Tamar's *father-in-law*. So there's that. If you're not familiar with the story, there's this really odd, R-rated passage in Genesis where Tamar's husband dies, and then her father-in-law Judah refuses to give her his youngest son in marriage (which was the widely-accepted custom of the day), so in order to get back at him, Tamar dresses up like a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law. "Ew" would be the correct response to that. Some of y'all didn't know that parts of the bible read like an episode of Jerry Springer. It does. (We'll just move on as quickly as possible from *that* story...)
- Next in the lineage is **Rahab** (in v. 5). Rahab was an *actual* prostitute, like for a living. And not only that, but she was from a wicked city that was under God's judgment.
- **Ruth** (also in v. 5) had a decent reputation as far as we know, but she was a Moabite, which means she was a descendent of a guy named Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughter (also ew).
- And then we have a woman who is only referred to as "**the wife of Uriah**" (in v. 6). Now, we know this woman's name, right? Anybody know what it is? Yeah, *Bathsheba*. So why would Matthew not use her *name* here? Well, it's because by calling her "the wife of Uriah," he is calling people's attention to quite possibly one of the most *shameful* stories about one of the most *noble* kings in Israel's history: where King David sleeps with his friend Uriah's wife. And when you take into consideration the cultural context, it's far more likely that it was *sexual assault*: David uses his power and position and force himself on her, gets her pregnant,

and then has her husband Uriah murdered to cover it up. So Matthew calls her “the wife of Uriah,” not as a slight against *her*, but as a slight against *David*. To make sure nobody glosses over that particular unacceptable moment in Israel’s story.

- And lastly we have **Mary** (in v. 16). Mary (as in the eventual mother of Jesus) has been *elevated* and *admired* in many ways—especially in certain church traditions—but it’s worth highlighting that in *her day*, she was simply a young unwed pregnant girl in a hyper-conservative society. Not exactly admired or revered like she is today. Quite the opposite, in fact. Mary and her pregnancy would’ve been the subject of quite a bit of gossip in her day.

So in summary, **when listing out Jesus’ family tree—the lineage that the long-awaited Messiah would come from—Matthew has highlighted for us: a vengeful seductress, a sex worker, a descendent of incest, a survivor of sexual assault, and a seemingly promiscuous teenager.** Fascinating, right? And again, Matthew’s purpose is not really to slight or fault any of these women for what happened—several of them obviously did nothing wrong at all. Rather, Matthew’s intent is to leave no stone unturned when it comes to some of the worst moments in Israel’s history. In Jesus’ family, it would seem, *nothing* gets swept under the rug.

So the question still is *why?* Why *do* that? If the *goal* of a genealogy was to make the person family look as impressive as possible, why include these very *unimpressive*, and even outright *shameful* details about Jesus’ lineage? Because that’s *not* what you do with a *resume*. With a resume, you include the very *best* things about you and leave out, or at least downplay, the not-so-good things. In a resume, you don’t say “I work really slow,” you say “I have a knack for attention to detail.” You don’t say “I don’t have much experience,” you say “I love new challenges.” With a resume, you often figure out a way to tweak the details in your favor.

And we know from history that people took a *similar* approach when it came to their *genealogies*. What people would do is that they would “edit” them a little to highlight the people in their family who would *help* their cause, and omit or gloss over the people in their family that *wouldn’t*.¹ Well, Matthew has made some edits to *this* genealogy too, but none of *his* edits make Jesus’ family tree look any *better*; they all make it look *worse*. In other words, **this was a somewhat self-destructive genealogy. In all likelihood, this**

¹ In fact, we have record of King Herod’s genealogy from around the same time as this one, and that’s what he does—he leaves out any of the questionable characters in his family, and highlights the most awesome ones.

would've led to just as many people *questioning* Jesus' legitimacy, as it would to people *accepting* it.

So what's the deal here? What is Matthew trying to do? Well honestly, he's trying to do a lot of different things. There are enough things going on in this genealogy that if I tried to explain all of them, we'd be here well into the afternoon. So just for time's sake, I'll point out just two of them to you. So remember: the fact that there *is* a genealogy is supposed to show us that Jesus is somebody special—that he's the Messiah. But **the type of people in the genealogy shows us the type of Messiah Jesus is**. It's supposed to help introduce to us who Jesus is and the types of people and he associates himself with. So if that's the case, I think **there are at least two types of people that Jesus includes**, based on this genealogy. First...

Jesus includes the *flawed*.

One thing that should be obvious from this genealogy is that God includes anyone, no matter how incredibly and unacceptably *flawed* they might be. Rahab is a sex worker by trade. Tamar seduces her father-in-law as an act of revenge. David is guilty of sexual assault. So to be honest, the word “flawed” is soft-selling it. **There's no getting around the fact that Matthew goes out of his way to highlight some of the most destructive, ugliest moments in Jesus' family history.**

Think with me for a second about David specifically. David is, from a human perspective, the most “royal,” impressive person in this lineage, by a long shot. He was the most revered, loved king in Israel's history. And *yet*, the way that Matthew presents him *here*, he makes sure we remember the most despicable thing that David ever did. What David did was far worse than what any woman in this lineage did. It's as if Matthew is saying that **even the most “impressive” person in Jesus' lineage is only in it by sheer grace**. Because no way would a person guilty of these kinds of things get in on merit. But in Jesus' family, it's not the good people who are in and the bad people who are out—however you personally want to define good and bad. In God's family, everyone gets in by grace and grace alone.

And by walking us through the brokenness and moral trainwreck that is Jesus' lineage, Matthew is showing us that the person at the *end* of the lineage—Jesus—is in a category all his own. No one else in the lineage is perfect—or really, anywhere *close* to perfect—but *Jesus is*. And the good news that Jesus comes to proclaim is that his *perfection* stands in the gap for our *imperfection*. His obedience stands in the gap for our disobedience.

When this Jesus goes to the cross at the *end* of his life, what he is doing—by his own admission—is becoming a “ransom” for our sin. He is rescuing us out of our sins—however heinous they might be. To where now, the final word on those in Jesus’ family is not “sinner,” or “screw-up,” or “flawed,” but rather “son or daughter of the king.” That’s how Jesus includes the flawed.

And part of the reason I think that’s important for us to realize, is because I meet people all the time who think that somehow their past sins and failures *disqualify* them from God’s grace. People who think “I’ve done too many things wrong to be a Christian.” “I’ve done too many things that I can’t take back.” “I’ve run too far and for too long.” People who say things like “if I walked into church, I bet the doors would catch on fire.” But this genealogy from Matthew would seem to suggest otherwise. It would seem to indicate that there is no such thing as being beyond the reach of God’s grace—that’s not a category that exists. So the truth according to Matthew is not only that God “puts up” with you, but that he desires to include you in his family.

And we can gather that not just from this genealogy, but from the entire story of the bible. One other prime example is *Paul*, the guy who wrote most of our New Testament. That guy, before Jesus rescued him, personally oversaw the execution of likely hundreds of Christians. And then Jesus intervenes and sets his life on an altogether different trajectory. To the point that in 1 Timothy (that passage we heard read earlier), he reflects on all that and says essentially, “you know what? I think one of the reasons God saved me is to show the world that *no one* is beyond saving.”² ‘If God used me, surely he can use anybody.’ **So one thing we see throughout the bible, and in this genealogy specifically, is that there are no limits or boundary lines around the type of person God can and will use to carry his story forward.** So listen, I don’t know what you came in here believing about yourself and how bad it is or how far gone you think you are, but I can promise it’s not too much for Jesus. Because Jesus includes the flawed. Second...

Jesus includes the excluded.

Second, by the people and stories he chooses to include in this lineage, Matthew is trying to communicate to us that Jesus associates with those who have been most shunned, scorned, and forgotten by the society around them. For one thing? But more specifically than that, Rahab was shunned by society because she was a prostitute. Ruth was excluded because of her family’s shady history. Mary was excluded because she

² See 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

was pregnant and unmarried in the middle of a hyper-conservative society. Even Tamar, who *was morally culpable* for her actions, did what she did in *response* to being shunned and excluded by her husband's family. When you read through this list, you see that Jesus ongoingly, repetitively, tends to *include* the *excluded*.

You know, all cultures down through history have looked down on certain people, in order to feel better about themselves. Whether it's people from certain races, people below a certain income level. Maybe it's people with certain physical or mental conditions. People with lower levels of education. Or maybe, like in this story, simply because of the family they come from. We all do this: we draw boundary lines to decide who's "in" and who's "out." But Matthew seems to be telling us through his genealogy here that **God is not interested in our boundary lines.**

Think about Jesus' *own* life—he shows up on the scene, and starts spending an awful lot of time hanging out with the people that nobody else wanted to hang out with: prostitutes, tax collectors, immoral men and women alike. Now we've mentioned this before, but you and I see that pattern in Jesus' life and we *love* it. We're like "yeah, way to go Jesus—stick it to the man! That's so punk rock of you to hang out with them!" We think it's the coolest thing ever. But it was not cool in Jesus' day. You think Jesus got killed because he was fashionably counter-cultural? No. Jesus got killed because he flew against the grain of society. He outright *rejected* his culture's social categories. He looked at those who were most *excluded*, and he *included* them when nobody else would. That *bothered* the people who saw it happen.

So if you're here today, **and you have experienced exclusion in your life, Matthew wants you to know that Jesus sees you, and he includes you.** Chances are there are many of you in this room that have never quite felt like you belonged. Whether it was due to your ethnicity, your gender, your sexuality, your education level, your personality, your past—for one reason or another, you feel like the story of your life is that you have been on the outside of society, peering in. If that's you, I want you to know that in God's kingdom, you've found a different kind of society. One that operates on a completely different premise. In God's kingdom, the first are last and the last are first. In God's kingdom, the strong are weak and the weak are strong. In God's kingdom, you, the excluded, are now included through Jesus.

And listen, not only does Jesus *seek you out*—he actually *identifies with you*. Jesus *himself* was excluded. The prophet Isaiah tells us that he was "despised and rejected by men," and "one from whom men hide their faces." John 1 tells us that "he came to his

own, and his own people did not receive him.” If anyone knows how it feels to be an outsider, it’s Jesus. So for those of you in this room who have experienced *rejection*: the scorn you’ve faced, the passing glances you get, the murmurs you feel happening behind your back—Jesus has been there too. And it’s from that place that he is able to *include us*. **Jesus includes the excluded.**

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So there we have two things Jesus’ genealogy does that are precisely *not* what you’d expect from a genealogy of that time: it includes the *flawed*, and it includes the *excluded*.

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So lastly, before we close things out today, I just want to leave you with one last question for us to consider: **does our family look like Jesus’ family?** What I mean by that is does our *church* family actively include the same types of people that *Jesus’* family did? Is this—our community—a place where the flawed and excluded feel at home? When a person walks through these doors, or wanders into the home where your LifeGroup meets...and they’ve messed up more times than they can count...when they’ve made a thousand horrible decisions that have blown up their life and pushed away everyone they love...when a person comes in worn down and broken by a past that seems to haunt them everywhere they go...**does that type of person come into contact with people in this community and think to themselves, “yeah, I feel at home here”?**

And also, when a person comes around our community...who has felt nothing but *rejection* in their life...when they’ve always felt like the odd one out, the one that nobody wants...when they’ve felt like awkward fifth wheel in every scenario, or worse—like people despise them because they’re different...**does that type of person walk come into contact with the people here and go** “these people don’t exclude me like everyone else does. I’m desired here, I’m valued here, I’m *wanted* here”?

I just want to leave us with that this morning. And I’ll be honest: I think in many ways we *do* embody that here. I’m not asking that question as a sneaky way to suggest that we suck at it. I think we *do* strive to be that type of place, and God has made us that kind of place in so many ways. But there’s always room for self-reflection, right? There’s always room for considering where we *haven’t* embodied that and to ask the Spirit to generate it in us more and more. Because I want us to be the type of community that Jesus’ family was. I want us to include the people Jesus includes. And every bit of it starts with realizing that *that’s what Jesus did for us. That’s who Jesus was for us*. As we consider Jesus’ posture towards us, his mindset towards *his* family, we become that type of family too. The type of family that welcomes the flawed, that includes the excluded.

Because that's what Jesus is like, and that's what Jesus' family is like....even if it isn't at all what you'd expect. Let's pray.