

You Don't Really Believe in Christmas

Matthew

By Ricky Jones

Bible Text: Matthew 1

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Obviously... I guess, maybe it is not obvious, but we are studying Advent, the coming of Christ. On this Christmas Sunday we will be looking at Matthew chapter one verses 18 through 25 together.

And before we read this text I want to issue a warning, not like the warning I gave the other day of parental guidance recommended, but a different warning which is basically this. You are about to hear a text that you have heard 1000 times. And your tendency is going to be to kind of go back into a sentimental mode and think, yeah, I know this. And I just want to encourage you. You don't get this. None of us ever gets this. There is more in these words than is possibly understandable to any of us. So please come to them with appreciation. Sit under them with humility with me.

Matthew chapter one beginning with verse 18 through 25.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.¹

This is the Word of the Lord.

All men are like grass and all of our glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers. The flowers fall. The Word of God stands forever. Amen.

I was visiting with a friend this week and he was telling me his testimony and how the Lord had just very recently become a reality in his life and called him to himself.

And he said, “You know, I grew up in the church my entire life, but I never understood. I never... it never dawned on me that the Lord of the universe wanted to have a relationship with me.”

And he looked at me with kind of a sheepish look. He said, “You know that is really a big deal.”

I said, “Yeah. That is a very big deal. It is an enormous deal.”

And I wanted to apply that to this text because our text teaches something that is easy to kind of let wash over you.

Joseph, I want you to understand, Joseph was a real human just like you who faced a big dilemma. His fiancé was pregnant and he had probably never been alone with her. And so he thought all the things you would think. And he didn't believe in miracles either, ok? I mean, if she tried to say, “Really, honest. I have never been with another man,” he would have thought the exact same thing you think and it was like no. This is crazy.

And an angel of the Lord really appeared to him in a dream and really said, “This baby is by the Holy Spirit.” And she was really pregnant. This is what this text is saying. She was really impregnated by the Holy Spirit and bore a son who would be Immanuel, God with us.

That is what we are talking about today. That is what we believe, nothing less than that. And that is a huge claim. That is a magnificent claim. It is an overwhelming claim. And it is a claim that, frankly, most of us don't believe. And so what I want to talk about today is I want to address the fact that we don't believe it and work backwards from there.

And the first thing I want you to see is this. We know the story, but we don't actually believe this really happened. It is a legend. It is part of our tradition. It is like George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. We know he didn't really chop down a cherry tree, but you kind of... it is a good illustration of his honesty and so we, you know, that is just part of our makeup, of who we are.

¹ Matthew 1:18-25.

But we don't really believe that this really happened. We don't really believe it.

But if you do believe it, that the Lord of the universe, the Creator of space, time and dimension that he became a reality, that he became a baby, if you believe that, there is only two valid reactions. The first valid reaction, if you hear that. Let me go back. If you understand and you hear that the Lord of space, time and dimension took on flesh and lived with us, the first valid reaction is to say this. I don't believe that. And if that is you, if you are sitting here this morning and you here because it is Christmas and you go to church on Christmas and that is part of your tradition, but you know you don't believe this, then I want to affirm your honesty and thank you for coming and I have got something to say to you in just a moment. I will come back to you in just a moment.

The second valid reaction is to say, "I do believe that and I am ordering my life around it. It is the most important fact of my being. And it is the organizing principle of how I live, how I work, what I do with my money, how I raise my family, what I do with my time. It is the most important fact in my life, that God himself became a baby and lived to save me is wildly more important than anything else that goes on in reality. And that is what organizes my life."

That is a valid reaction.

What is not a valid reaction, what is not a true reaction at all is to say, "Yes, I believe this, but it doesn't really mean anything." And if this is not... if this fact is not an overwhelming principle in your life what I want to convince you of today, this is an odd thing to do, you are going to... people are going to ask you... well, if they were to ask you, "What happened at church today?" you are going to say, "Well, the preacher tried to convince me I don't believe in Jesus." But that is what I want to do. I want to convince you that you don't believe in Jesus.

Just because the sheer gravity of the fact demands a response.

For instance, if you were to get a letter in the mail tomorrow and it was from the IRS and it says you owe four million dollars in back taxes, the gravity of the issue would demand that you made a phone call, wouldn't it? You would be saying, "That is unbelievable. There is no possible... I never made that much money in my entire life. I can't possibly owe that much in taxes. It can't be true." But the gravity of the situation demands a phone call. It demands that you do something.

On the other hand, [?] if you get an email, like you probably will get an email tomorrow saying you have won ten million pounds in the London lottery, I have gotten that email like 12 times. If there was a possibility that you believed it, wouldn't it change the way you live?

Now, it doesn't change anything. It gets about three seconds response of us. We hit

delete and move on with our life. Why? We don't believe it. If there was a possibility that you believed it, it would change the way you live.

The fact that God himself wants to be in relationship with you, that God himself has took on flesh to relate to you, to save you, that is such an enormous reality that it demands a response. And if you don't respond to that, that reveals the truth of the fact that you don't believe it, that you don't believe it.

Now if you are in this kind of third group that says, "Well, I believe that Jesus was the Son of God. That is part of what I believe, but it doesn't really change my life," why would you feel that way? And I would suggest there is three different ways, reasons why you would think that. First, is just kind of a... you have a traditional faith. You believe in Jesus the same way you believe that America is a great country, the same way you believe that the Cowboys are the best football team. Ok, I chose the Cowboys. That was wise. It could be college or pro, whichever. Just go with it.

And it is just what you grew up believing. You believe it because you grew up believing it. You were never convinced of it. It never made an impact on your life. It is just what you grew up believing.

And, you know, if you grew up in Germany you would have grown up thinking Germany was a great country and you would have grown up thinking the Berlin something or others were the best soccer team. And that is what you would have just believed. That is just traditional belief.

If you had grown up in India you would have grown up thinking India was a great country. You would have been right. And you probably would have grown up believing in Hinduism, because it is just what your family believes. And that is where a lot of our Christianity is. We are Christians. We believe in Jesus the same way we believe in our football teams. It is just what we kind of accept. But it is never changing.

There is also a tendency for us to have kind of a rational belief that never becomes an experiential one. Yeah, I believe that, but I believe it because it has always been taught to me. I believe it because I was made to read some books about it when I was in high school and kind of got convinced, but it never became experiential. And the best way I can explain that to you is this. When I was learning to drive, like you, my mom would always say, "You have got to slow down going around corners. You can lose control."

I believed that, I guess. But one day I almost joined that fraternity of men whose last words were, "I wonder how fast this will go?" And as I was coming down the hill and just going as fast as I could and a truck pulled out in front of me at the bottom of the hill and he was going as fast he as he could. Unfortunately, he was... his fasted he could go was about 100 miles an hour less than mine. And we went into corner. And I lost control of the car. I lost control so badly that I let go of the steering wheel and got into the floor board. Doing no good here. Let's just go somewhere else.

And went off the side of the road. I remember the last thing I was thinking was I am probably going to die now. Those were my last words. The bumper of the car stuck in the ground. The car spun around the bumper, landed on all four wheels, regained consciousness, backed out and drove away.

Sorry, that is just the way my life has been.

But, you know, I believed.... up until that point I believed you could lose control of a car. I had been told it. I had seen it on video. But now I had experienced it and it was a different reality for me.

Some of you believe that Jesus became a man. Jesus was a man, that God became a man in the form of Jesus. But you never experienced it. You have never met him. And it has not affected your life.

The third reason why a lot of us say we believe it, but it doesn't affect our life is this. We were taught to believe in a Jesus that doesn't exist. We believed in a Jesus with strings, a Jesus that was always kind of holding the carrot out in front of us saying, "I am going to give you a better life, a more victorious life. I will make you a happier person. I am going to make you a better person. I am going to fix all your relationships. I am going to fix everything in your life if you will just do x."

And we did x and we killed ourselves trying to do it and we never got the carrot and finally we just gave up on it. That happened to me.

If you are in that group, I want you to understand I have been there. I have tasted that. But what I want you to understand is that Jesus doesn't. The true Jesus who exists promised to give us rest and he really does live it. And we need to come to him. And I want to introduce you to the one who actually exists.

I want to convince you, first of all, that if you are not organizing your life around Jesus then you don't believe him. And, secondly—and this is not something I usually do—but, secondly, I want to take just a few seconds to give you reasons why you should consider it. I want you to... I want to leave our text and this idea of Jesus coming to save us from our sins for just a moment and go back to the entirety of the New Testament and give you two reasons that are not going to convince you that Jesus is God or not. I know that. But what they are going to do is I think they will give you reason why you should at least investigate it.

The first reason is this. I want you to think about Jesus and notice that he belongs in a very exclusive club. He is the only human who has ever lived who belongs in two completely different groups. The first group would be this, one of the most influential people who has ever lived. No matter how you define influence, no matter how you define history, you can't deny Jesus belongs in that group.

If you think religion is important, then obviously Jesus would be one of the most important people that have ever lived. But if you think politics is important and you think, you want to go back and trace your... the importance of democracy. You would go through George Washington and John Locke and see the influence of Christianity.

If you think that, you know, empire building is important, you can't deny the importance of the Holy Roman Empire in world history and its influence of Christianity.

If you think peace is important and the development of nations getting along with each and learning to put away hatred and I hope you think that is important, well, you can't deny the influence of Jesus in the lives of men like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. You can't deny his influence. He is one of the most important people who has ever lived. Whatever your definition of important, he belongs in that group.

But, secondly, he belongs in another group of people that we would call not the most influential people who ever lived. We would call these people narcissistic personality disorder nuts. And those people are people who go around claiming to be God, people who say, not, "Follow my teaching," but "Come to me. Believe in me."

Understand. Jesus said that. He said not, "Do what I do and find the light of the world," but "I am the light of the world."

He said not, "Believe my teachings and receive the resurrection." He said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Do you see how nuts that is? People who believe those kinds of things would be in the category of like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Elvis. One seeker way.

And Jesus is the only person who belongs in both of those categories. Because the rarity of that he deserves the consideration. He deserves your consideration.

The second thing, the second reason why he deserves your consideration is this. Jesus convinced Jews that he was God. To convince Greeks that you are God wouldn't be that hard. Pretty much everybody did it. You know, it was kind of part of their tradition. Zeus got lonely, saw a cute little human girl, would come down, have a baby by her and bang there is Hercules. Now that was kind of part of the Greek tradition, you know. You know, the Pantheist, the eastern mystics, they believed everybody was God. You have all got it. I have got it. So to convince them that they were God, that would be nothing impressive.

But to convince a Jew that you were God means going to someone who has been trained for thousands of years to believe that there is one God and he is so different from us that to look upon him would be to die. He is so different from us that to touch something that he has made sacred would be to die. And he convinced them that he was, as John said it, the Word in the beginning with God, the Creator of all that there is, that nothing has been created that he didn't create.

He convinced Jews who lived with him. You know, on one hand you want to go, “That’s not a big deal to convince people you are God. Elvis did it.” I mean, there really are people who go worship Elvis every year. But none of them lived with him. None of them... and they are weird people. And none of them... those people influenced culture and are changing history. And he convinced people that he was God to the point that they died rather than renounce.

And I think if you will examine... and, again, I know those aren’t convincing anybody who came in here not believing, but I want you... I think if you will examine it, you will come up with the self evident conclusion that either Jesus was a liar and the greatest scam artist who ever was and therefore it is kind of odd that he would come up with such a great ethic. Or maybe he was what he really said he was.

And I want to encourage you to examine that. And if you... and I want to encourage you to examine it because of three reasons. There is three reasons you want to believe it, because God told Joseph to name him Jesus.

Actually, he didn’t tell him to name him Jesus. He told him to name him Jesu and somehow they came up with a J sound which is the Greek adaptation of the Hebrew Yeshua which means Yahweh saves. He told him to name him Yahweh saves because he will save his people from their sins. And I want you to understand. It is important that we reflect on that.

What does it mean that Jesus saves his people from their sins? First of all he means that he saves us from the penalty of our sins. We all know that if there is a God and even in our worst moments when we quit believing that we hope there is a God, because what is it that makes us stop believing in God? What is it that really causes you to have stumbling blocks? It is injustice. It is when you look at the world and you go, “The wicked are doing fine and the righteous are suffering. And if there was a God he couldn’t let that happen.”

And you know if there is a God there has to be a day of reckoning coming when people will receive what they deserve. And that is a good thing and it is a frightening thing. If everybody else receives what they deserve for the things they have done in their body, then I need to receive the things I deserve, the punishment I deserve for the sins I have committed in my life. And that is not an encouragement.

And Jesus saves his people from the penalty of their sin. As he comes and lives life for us and embraces us and as our husband he pays our debt for us and he takes that punishment upon his own back. He saves us from the penalty of our sin, but he does more than that. He saves us from the power of our sins.

What does that mean? Well, it is like this. Have you ever laid in bed at night and realized you weren’t as good as you should have been that day? If you haven’t, what drug do you take, because I want to take that.

Have you ever lay in bed at night and went, “I was not as good to my spouse as I should have been. I was not as good of a parent as I could have been. I was not as good of a friend as I could have been”? When you... that feeling tells us a couple of things. It tells us, “I know what to do. I just don’t do it.”

And that is because of the power of sin, because it is not just... sin is not just a list of things that you ought to do or ought not to do. Sin is a power that gets in front... it gets into us and so it makes us unable to turn the television off and go listen to our children. It makes us unable to stop thinking about ourselves for five minutes. It makes us unable to not live in fear. It makes us unable to not live with want. It makes us unable to not live terrified of what might happen and it makes us unable to not protect ourselves.

And what Jesus promises when he saves us from our sin is he promises to come into us so that we are not slaves to that anymore, so that you are getting better.

Now, unfortunately, not unfortunately. The way he chooses to do it in his wisdom is he makes us more and more aware of our sin. And so often times the more we live with him the worse we feel. And he makes us... he saves us from the power of our sin. He enables us to be what he calls us to be.

And, finally, he saves us from the presence of our sin.

I... when I was a campus minister, you know, I had always got to deal with people. And a lot of times in the bigger families there would be kind of one person who got involved with a ministry and everybody else in the family wouldn’t. And, you know, that was partly because of the whole college thing and I am not going to do what big sister has done or I am not going to do what little sister has done.

And I had one girl who had some sisters and she asked me on four different occasions. It was really kind of funny. She would ask me on four different occasions. What do you think of my sister?

And finally I just kind of... I got along with her and I said, “Do you really want to know the answer to that question?”

She said, “Yeah.”

I said, “She lives like somebody who never believed her daddy loved her.”

And all of the sudden she started crying.

That is what I think about your sister and I really wish I could help her.

And she was thinking some kind of funny answer was going to come, but the fact of the

matter is most of us live our lives with scars of what other people have done to us or what we have done to ourselves. And we can't get rid of that.

Some people have been sending it so violently that they live in fear of going around corners because they honestly think someone may be lurking around that corner waiting upon them.

We live in fear of our vulnerability. We live in fear of our sin, of other peoples. And what Jesus promises us today when we live in his presence where there is no fear, where there is no loneliness, when he himself wipes every tear from our eye. And we live in his presence and there is no need of a gate because there is nothing bad coming. And there is no need of light because he himself is our light.

He promises a day when we live in his presence and we are free from our sins. We are free from the presence. That is how he saves us from our sins.

And, finally, the way he saves us from our sin, this kind of... in the way of wrapping all this conversation up is this. I want you to understand there is a vast difference between the way Jesus saves us from sin and the way all other religions do it, because every religion will promise to save you from sin. They do. They don't use those words, but they all promise that. And they will to some degree.

For instance, the autobiography of Malcolm X, great reading. You ought to read it. Fun reading. Important to our history. In the autobiography of Malcolm X he talks about he was saved from sin by Islam. And it went like this. He was in prison for armed robbery and got a letter from his brother and it said, "If you want to get out of prison, stop smoking."

And his brother started leading him through the steps of Islam until he bowed his knee to Allah and his life was changed. And there is no denying.

But do you see what had to happen? He had to save himself by following a step. And that is not the way Jesus does it. Jesus saves us and then he gives us the [?].

My favorite story and I am going to end it, one of my favorite Christmas stories is this, the story of Rusty Wilmers. Rusty was a redneck from West Virginia. Maybe that is why I associate with him so much. But he is a redneck from West Virginia whose mom tried to bring him up in the church, tried to teach him about Jesus and she died when he was about six years old. And his father was a drunk and a very violent man. And Rusty's life was one long series of being beaten by his dad and running away and then being punished for running away by being beaten worse.

And so finally when he was about 14 years old he quit coming home. He developed a friendship with a guy who owned a bake shop, Jim. And Jim kind of was his daddy. He actually called Jim pops. And Jim came up one day and Rusty was in and out of prison his whole life and Jim came home... came in one day with an idea how they were going

to be wealthy and never have to work again. And Rusty was all for that. And so all it involved was a little armed robbery of someone who had a very valuable coin collection.

And they went in to rob the man and, of course, ended up doing a little murder while they were doing it and went on this spree through West Virginia and western parts of Virginia. And before this spree was over four people were dead and rusty was in prison. By the time he was 22 years old he was in prison for the rest of his life.

When Bob McAllister was 22 years old he was serving his first internship for the White House. He had just graduated college, an up and comer, a very powerful guy. And he was in the Nixon White House. He met the president for the first time when he was 26 and he became a very powerful guy. When the Nixon presidency ended he went back home, became very important in politics of Virginia or South Carolina, I mean. And he just got involved in that. But he eventually lost his business. He lost his wealth. He was converted and his wife told him... his job was such a burden to him one day that his wife told me he would come home. He would either eat or don't have that job anymore or don't come home. So he came home, changed jobs, began going to church. The Lord converted him.

He was driving... he got back involved in politics eventually and was driving to the state house and there is an enormous traffic jam and he was late. And he was furious. And in that traffic jam he finally got to the front, you know, that one point when you can finally see why this traffic is going so slow. And the reason why the traffic was going so slow was because in the middle of the road was a man on a wheelchair. And he did something completely out of character for him. Bob McAllister pulled over in front of the wheelchair, got out, pushed the guy over to the side and the man looked at him and said, "Hey, I am O'Dell. How are you?"

And Bob said, "O'Dell, why are you in the middle of the road?"

And O'Dell said, "Well, there is this lady in my neighborhood whose daughter takes care of her and she is the only person she has got to take care of her and now her daughter is sick and so they don't have anything to eat. And I know there is this homeless shelter a couple of blocks down the road from here and I am going to get her something to eat.

And, you know, and Bob asked where she lived. And he calculated about a three and a half mile trip. O'Dell is going about a half a mile an hour. Seven hours in a wheel chair didn't really sound like a good plan.

So he said, "Can I give you a ride?"

And, of course, O'Dell was happy with that.

So he picked O'Dell up, put him in the front seat, put the wheel chair in the back, drove down to the homeless shelter, drove back to drop the food off. And when he did that he

walked in and he said, "I had given speeches on many different legislature floors about poverty, but I had never smelled it."

And walking in there haunted him and he drove home that day and the one thought in the back of his mind was when have you ever done anything for anybody that wasn't yourself?

And so instead of going back to work, he went back to the homeless shelter and he volunteered the next day. He worked there for a while and they said to him, "You know, we have got all the help we need down here, but there is something we need. We need somebody to go work in the prisons. There are some men there who have no one to write them. Would you mind visiting the men on death row?"

So he is started going to death row once a week just visiting with people.

One night he was walking out and he said out of the corner of his eye he saw something that looked like a human sized shrimp curled up on the floor, skin pasty, hair matted down, pornography scattered all over the floor, food scattered all over the floor, roaches crawling over this person. He laid his eyes for the first time on Rusty [?]. And he called out to him. He said, "Rusty, wake up. Look at yourself."

And the figure kind of woke up, shook his head and he looked and he kind of saw himself and he said he had the look in his face that he saw it for the first time.

He said, "Rusty, you are a mess. You are dead inside and you are dying outside, but, Rusty, Jesus will help you if you will call out to him and ask for help."

And Rusty said he prayed these words. He said, "Jesus, I don't know anything about you, but if you will help this, if you will help me, I will learn."

Bob had to leave. Visiting hours were over. He drove home with that feeling that he had just done spiritual warfare. He felt like there were demons in his car. He drove home as fast as he could to try to get away from them. It didn't help. And he called out to the Lord to save him and he eventually got some level of peace.

That was on Friday. On Monday as soon as he possibly could he went back to see if it had really happened. And when he walked down the cell block he saw a cell that wreaked with the smell of Lysol and he saw a room that was spotless and he saw a man with a new hair cut and new clothes and completely cleaned up smiling at him from his bed saying, "I figured Jesus wanted me to clean up."

And it began a relationship that was a life long relationship for Rusty of two men with nothing in common. And Bob continued to disciple Rusty and teach him the gospel and Rusty held on to the faith until the day they executed him.

And a few years and before Rusty was executed Bob got a call from the George Bush administration and John Sununu wanted him to come and help be part of the administration. He said, "Do you want to come back to Washington?"

And Bob said, "Absolutely, I do. There is nothing I want more."

But he started thinking about the things he would be leaving behind and he thought about Christmas and that Christmas there was a family going through town that ran out of gas or the car broke down. It didn't run out of gas. The car broke down. They had no money. They were getting nothing for Christmas.

And Bob heard about it and he shared that with Rusty and the men on death row get gifts one time a year. They get care packages one time a year. And he got everybody on death row to give something to this family. And Bob dropped that box of gifts off with a note that said, "Merry Christmas from death row."

And Bob realized that George Bush had plenty of people to help him. But Rusty had nobody else. And the message of Christmas is that Jesus came to save the dying sinners like Rusty and Jesus came to save selfish, arrogant businessmen like Bob McAllister. He came to save you.

Please pray with me.

Jesus, we want to believe in you, but we don't. And we won't believe in you until you come into our lives and make yourself real and force us to see. And I pray that you would do that today. Amen.