

# AN IMPERFECT FAMILY

## MATTHEW 1:24-25

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

As I look around the room tonight, it's great to see so many families together on Christmas Eve. And if your family didn't make it tonight, I'm sure many of you will spend some family time before Christmas Day is done.

But sometimes family get-togethers during the holidays can be stressful and full of drama. Varying perspectives on current events, and turbo-charged opinions - added to the drama that comes in an election year - and you've got the recipe for a full family blow-out.

Columnist, Catherine Pearson, recently wrote an article for the NY Times: "How To Avoid Family Drama This Holiday Season." She gives three suggestions to tamp down family drama during the Christmas season...

**First**, Catherine tells us to "control the setting." As the host of the party you can set the agenda, and direct the conversation, and establish a peaceful atmosphere...

**Second**, "find a connection." Family members are less likely to argue if they share an interest... if they work together on a puzzle, or both play their guitars, or put their combined cooking skills to use in the kitchen...

And **third**, "when in doubt, talk sports." When liberal Uncle Bob asks your right-wing Cousin Rob what he thinks of about the presidential polls, a good ole, "*How bout them Dawgs!*" can work wonders. Immediately, the room lightens and tensions ease. Sports can be a unifier.

We all can use Catherine's advice. The truth is no family is perfect. There's some tension in every family.

And the same was true of the family into which Jesus was born. Often when we think of the family of Joseph and Mary we assume they were a faultless family. They were the Waltons or Huxtables of first-century Nazareth.

*God wouldn't send His sinless Son into a flawed family, would He?* He must've picked a choice couple, with a mint marriage, and with do-no-wrong siblings.

We envision Joseph and Mary sharing a pristine, peaceful, idyllic life. No way did they have the kinds of hang-ups, and issues, and baggage our family carries.

Yet we're so naive with our assumptions. At the time of Jesus' birth, *Mary is just a little girl - barely a teen. And Joseph has no experience in these matters. He's a construction guy.* You don't think their hearts were full of apprehension, and worry, and fear, and doubt?

What if Joseph and Mary had read the New York Times and tried to follow Catherine Pearson's suggestions for getting along at Christmas. **Her first bit of advice is to control the setting - are you kidding?**

There was nothing about their setting that Joseph and Mary controlled. Their lives had spun *out of control*. I'm sure Joseph once had a plan, but that was before his fiancée turned up pregnant, and he was visited by an angel. *How do you say "no" to an angel?*

Now he's escorting a woman nine months pregnant on foot, and burro-back across mountains and rocky terrain at the whim of a dictator in Rome who could care less about the inconvenience this was all causing.

*You can hear their conversation as they travel*, Mary tells him, "Joseph, you're going too fast." Then she says, "you're going to slow." Then she says, "why are you swerving?" Then she says, "I'm about to throw up." Nothing Joseph does is right by this expectant mom.

*Hey, but when he gets to Bethlehem he can get things under control! Have you read the story... the hotel sign says "no vacancy."* And again, the couple improvises. They end up spending the night in a barn. For Joseph nothing is going right. **Control the setting?**

And **find a connection?** The second of Pearson's suggestions **would've been equally hard to follow.** These were just kids still recoiling from events that had caught them off-guard, and changed their lives. They both were now uncertain of everything they thought they'd known... At this point, unity was a struggle

Understand, the Christmas miracle begins with a troubled relationship. A husband and his betrothed wife are battling to stay together. When the angel visited Joseph, he had just found out his beloved was pregnant, and he was actually contemplating his exit strategy... *whether he should have Mary stoned or just send her to a near-by city and let her start over...*

And I don't care how much you've disliked your spouse I'll bet you've never considered stoning! *Gas chamber maybe, firing squad perhaps, but not stoning!*

For a long while, Joseph particularly, had to work through some serious trust issues... Did he really buy the angel's explanation? He was trapped between *believing the impossible* or *accepting Mary's infidelity*...

There's a movie called "The Nativity Story," that chronicles the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. One scene paints a picture of a nervous Joseph and Mary trying to sort out their predicament together...

They've been traveling the long, rocky road from Nazareth south to Bethlehem, when they stop for the evening by a body of water. Mary is cooking a fish for supper that Joseph must've caught earlier that day. She says to him, with a smile, "The baby is moving."

As she rubs her hand across her belly, Joseph looks at her with a mixture of excitement and concern. She asks him, "You never really told me about your dream." Apparently, Joseph doesn't talk much these days, but Mary tries to pry it out of him, "No, really. Tell me."

Joseph leans in and says, "The angel came to me. He told me the child within you had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and that I should not be afraid."

Mary is depending on this man, so she asks him sincerely, "Are you afraid?" Joseph whispers, "Yes, are you?" She replies, "Yes." They both giggle nervously.

But Mary is thinking far into the future. She continues, "Do you ever wonder when we'll know? When we'll know that He knows He's more than just a child. Will it be something He says... a look in His eye?"

Joseph offers a helpless shrug. He's obviously aware of his own inadequacies. He confesses to Mary, "I wonder if... if I'll even be able to teach Him anything..." The scene reminds me these two were still just kids and struggling to make sense of these events. I'm sure Pearson's advice, **find a connection**, at this very moment was something easier said than done.

And recall her **third suggestion, when in doubt, talk sports**. I doubt sports was of much interest to a bewildered carpenter, and his betrothed bride on the verge of natural childbirth, in a strange, foreign city.

Or course, when the shepherds showed up he could've said, "How bout them Rams!" Or maybe talked basketball with *we three kings*. "How bout them Kings." Or said to the "magi," "How bout them Magic!"

But here's how I know Joseph and Mary didn't have time for sports - *they were dirt poor*. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from you don't have the energy for diversionary pastimes like sports.

Realize Jesus wasn't born into a rich family, or a prestigious family, or as we've noted even a particularly close family. Joseph and Mary were poor, and humble, and confused, and battling to understand each other.

On His eighth day, when Jesus is circumcised, Joseph can't afford the customary sacrifice of a lamb, so He opts for the pauper's exemption - *two turtledoves*. That means Joseph had little money. It'd been awhile since he and Mary had two quarters to rub together. If it hadn't been for the gifts the magi brought, they would've never had enough money to escape the evil King Herod's plan to slaughter the infant boys of Bethlehem. I imagine they sold the gold and frankincense and myrrh to finance their trip to Egypt.

And obviously, Joseph was poor because he had lousy health insurance. *Mary gives birth in a barn!* It's been said, "The reason Jesus was born in a stable was Joseph had an HMO." Their budget really tightened when Mary had to start purchasing swaddling clothes.

When God came to earth He chose to join a family, *forever ennobling and exalting the nuclear family*. But though Joseph and Mary were a family, by anyone's standards ***they were just barely a family***. The odds were stacked against them. If they'd come to me for counseling I might've cautioned them to take a step back and go slow. If they'd asked their parents or townsfolk what to do, they might've split up for good.

Think it over, and you'll agree, Jesus was born to a family facing many of the struggles today's families face. Mary and Joseph *didn't* have a perfect marriage, yet Jesus, *the One greater than the angels*, still graced their family with His presence. That first Christmas, the Son of God chose to join a very, very imperfect family.

And that's why there's hope for your family this Christmas... Your family might also be struggling... In your house there's strife, anger, worry, friction. Perhaps your family is on the ropes... It's down for the count...

*Maybe there's a lack of trust between members... Or you're hearing from God, but nobody else is... Or there's an unexpected pregnancy - or some other surprising circumstance just turned up the pressure cooker of your life, and you're groping for direction.*

*Maybe it's a trip home - or a visit from your in-laws that has you stressed out... Or it's a lack of health insurance... or the kids are a drain... or you realize diapers cost far*

*more than swaddling clothes... And why, oh why, does your husband want to chase his dream and move the family down to Egypt? You're just now meeting a few of your neighbors in Bethlehem...*

It reminds me of the husband and wife who were squabbling over the new vehicle they wanted to buy for Christmas. *He* wanted a new truck, while *she* had her eye on a fast, fancy sports car. They argued for days...

Finally, the wife laid down an ultimatum... "If I don't get something that'll go from 0 to 180 in four seconds you're going to experience a very lonely Christmas."

Well, the husband bristled up. He didn't like her attitude. So on Christmas morning there it was, marked by a bright red bow... a new bathroom scale. *Funeral arrangements for the husband will be announced soon.*

If there's friction in your family this holiday season - between husband and wife, or parent and child, whatever you do, *don't give up!* Don't anybody give up!

Even if you're family is coming apart faster than gift-wrapping on Christmas Day - for you there's still "good tidings of great joy..." Listen, this Christmas Jesus really does want to join, and save, and rule your family!

The Holy Spirit wants to overshadow you and yours, and work a miracle in your midst. He wants to spread goodwill toward men and bring peace on earth - and have it commence in your family! Jesus brings new life to dying hopes... fresh breath to stale relationships...

Gordon MacDonald tells of a smart, successful African lady he met after a speaking engagement. This lady identified herself as a physician in a local hospital. She went by an obviously American name. That's when MacDonald asked her, "What's your African name?"

She immediately strung together several beautiful, rhythmic syllables. Her name had a musical sound. MacDonald asked her, "What does your name mean?" The lady replied, "Child who takes the anger away."

Of course, Pastor MacDonald sensed a good story, so he asked her to explain how she got her name. This was her answer... "My parents were forbidden to marry, but they loved each other, and they defied the family opinion and married anyway. At first their parents refused to have contact with them, until my mother became pregnant with me. When my grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. My birth swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me..."

This also would've been a great name for Jesus when He was born, "Child who takes the anger away."

For when you come to the manger and bow before the newborn King, Jesus sweeps away your anger, your pride, your fear, your insecurity, your selfishness.

Jesus doesn't just forgive us, but the way He forgives us enables us to forgive others. His love for us causes us to love the person we formerly thought was unlovable. *Even if they're a member of our own family.*

In a big way, Christmas is about the harmony, healing, and happiness Jesus brings with Him when He joins a family. Have you invited Jesus to join your family this Christmas? You've come to church to worship Him, *now go home and take Jesus with you!*