

A MAN OF PRINCIPLES

By Which Ones Will You Live?

Text: Psalm 80:1-7,17-19; Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

The E-Principles

God's desires for us are so good. He wants us to know a love and peace and joy more glorious than anything this world offers. But in order for these desires to come to fruition, God must win the battle for our heart. In a nutshell: Our program must give way to His. Our possessions must be put in motion as His. And – as I want to think about with you today – our principles – the values by which we typically handle the tough challenges we meet in our relationships or circumstances -- these need to be replaced by the far more life-giving principles by which the King himself operates. I think of THREE in particular.

Take for example, what I will call the EVENING Principle – as in “evening the score.” We see this principle operating in everything from the road rage to the school violence to the courtroom struggles to the vitriolic diatribes commonplace in politics, the workplace, and many a home today. The wisdom most of us absorb as we go through life is simply this: If people let us down, rough them up. Get even. Hurt the person who's hurt you. To do less is to make yourself a doormat. To do less is to deny the justice you deserve. Evening the score becomes a way of life.

Closely allied to the Evening Principle so common in the world today is the ESCAPE Principle. The mindset there is: If it isn't working out, get out. Only idiots keep investing in a losing proposition. So, if this marriage isn't what I had in mind, I'm out of here. If this employee isn't what I imagined, they're out of here. If this church isn't what I'd hoped for, I'm down the road. If this relationship's not what I expected – hit “Escape.”

Underlying the Principle of Evening and Escape is one last orientation I'll touch on. Let's call it the EXPEDIENCE Principle. In other words: If the path requires sacrifice, sacrifice the path. The underlying assumption is that life is supposed to be about my comfort, my pleasure, my advancement. So, if it gets difficult, the path should be different. Life should be expedient (as in easy and convenient) for me.

A Man of Kingdom Principles

Can you see any evidence of those three principles in the world today? Can you find any of them in your own life? It is because these principles play such an active role in human affairs that the story we read in Matthew 1 is so

provocative, I think.

For example, if there is anyone who might have wanted to EVEN the score in the face of being hurt, surely it would have been this man Joseph. Really think about it. His fiancé had pledged her love and loyalty to him. You can see him telling his friends and family the news. You can imagine him brimming with all the joy and hope with which any person anticipates their wedding day. **“But before they came together, [Mary] was found to be with child”** (Matt 1:18).

We can put a Christmas card frame around the story, but it can't change the reality. The sense of betrayal Joseph must have experienced at the news had to be staggering. Put yourself inside of that scenario. What do you feel like? What do you want to do? You want to shred the person. You want to hurt & humiliate them as they've done you. Everything in the human nature says: “Make them pay for doing this to me!”

But here's the rub. Where the flesh says: “Even the Score,” the Spirit of God often says: “Show mercy.” **“God has shown you, O man, what is good,”** said the prophet Micah. He has shown you...not what is human; not what is natural and understandable; not what lots of other people do. God has shown YOU **“what is good”** -- He has shown you the way of His kingdom. **“And what does the LORD require of you?”** Micah asks. **“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”** (Micah 6:8).

Joseph must have been steeped in God's Word. Matthew says, **“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man”** – literally, a “just” man, a man faithful to the law of God's kingdom – he **“did not want to expose [Mary] to public disgrace”** (Matt 1:19). Now, Hebrew law (as many of you know) would have allowed Joseph to post Mary's failure on Facebook. He could demand that she be publicly stoned and the YouTube video would probably go viral. Everyone would be on Joseph's side

But somehow, the Worldly Principle of Evening had been replaced in Joe's heart by the Kingdom Principle of MERCY. Joseph did not want Mary to receive the judgment she apparently deserved. That's what mercy is. Grace is giving someone a good they DON'T deserve. Mercy is not giving someone a bad they DO deserve. And so, we're told – even before he heard a further word from God on the subject -- **“Joseph had in mind to [just] divorce Mary quietly”** (Matt 1:19).

Now, as you know, before Joseph got around to going forward with that plan, **“an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream”** and told him that the child in Mary was in fact the seed of the Holy Spirit, the One who would save his people from their sins (Matt 1:20-21).

Sometimes I read this account and think to myself: Right. So... that settled it then. The dream explained everything, so Joe was O.K. again. He woke up in the morning and said to himself, "Phew! I'm glad that confusion got straightened out! Now I feel completely fine. It's just God's baby." And then I come to my senses. "No!" I think. "It wasn't that simple. A part of Joseph had to be yelling "I don't care what I dreamed last night; this situation is not working out -- I've got to get out of this thing!"

But, here again, we see how a Worldly Principle somehow got replaced in Joseph's heart by a Kingdom Principle. In Joseph, the human principle of Escape was supplanted by the Kingdom Principle of **FAITHFULNESS**. When his flesh was screaming "Get out before it gets worse," the voice of the Spirit said, "Joseph, stay faithful, until it gets better— until you've seen what God yet does." And so, Matthew tells us, "**Joseph... did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife**" (Matt 1:24).

There is also a third virtue at work in Joseph's life. It's the one that always underlies the behavior of any believer who lives by mercy and faithfulness in an even-stein and escape-oriented world. The only way someone responds to life's toughest problems the way Joseph does here is if the human Principle of Expedience – of doing what is easy and convenient -- is being progressively replaced by the Kingdom Principle of **OBEDIENCE**. The great British evangelical, John Stott, reminds us that "greatness in the kingdom of God is always measured in terms of obedience."

An English visitor to a U.S. church once made this comment: "You Americans are so concerned about being happy. It's like you think that your kingdom is the focal point of God's design rather than God's kingdom being the focal point of your efforts." Could that be true? Do we have it backwards? Do we think God's job is to meet our objectives or are we clear that our job is to meet His? When was the last time you were obedient to the call of God, even though it took you down a path that was very hard or where you couldn't see clearly?

Erik Weihenmayer has been blind since age 13, but that didn't stop him from trying to climb mountains. On one particular journey, he listened to the bell tied to the climber in front of him, so he would know what direction to go. He listened to the voice of teammates who would shout back to him, "Death fall two feet to your right!" so he would know what direction not to go. He listened to the sound of his pick jabbing the ice, so he would know whether the ice was safe to cross. And on May 25, 2001, on a mountain where 90 percent of climbers never make it to the top — and 165 have died trying – Erik Weihenmayer crested the peak of Mount Everest!

Obedience comes from the Latin word "obaudire," which comes from the root "audiere," which means "to listen." To obey means to listen to God's commandments – not just intellectually but with that deep heart-hearing that

moves the will to put one foot in front of the next along the path He marks out, even when we can't see the summit toward which He is leading us. It's hard to do this, of course. That's why the word "disciple" comes from the same root word as "discipline." The way of the Kingdom is an athletic venture. It's like running a race or like climbing a mountain.

We tend to forget this. We're like the characters in the fourth grade Sunday School pageant. The Innkeeper says to Joseph and Mary: "Can't you see the 'No Vacancy' sign?" Joseph says: "Yes, but can't you see that my wife is expecting a baby at any time?" The Innkeeper replies: "Well, that's not MY fault." Joseph says: "Well, it's not MINE, either!"

It had to have been hard for Joseph to keep climbing up the mountain of mercy and faithfulness so obediently. What I want to know is how he made it to the summit? That's my way of asking, "How can we too?" Where does a person get the motivation and strength to live obediently? How can our faltering willpower be replaced by God's steady will? Let me leave you with two suggestions.

For The Joy Set Before Us

First, fix your mind on God's greatness. The famed missionary, Elisabeth Elliot, writes: "Do you remember what Moses said when he had that stunning encounter with God in the desert? God told him that he was going to have to tell Pharaoh to let the people go. Moses said, 'Who am I?' God reminded him that it really didn't make any difference who HE was. What mattered was who GOD was. Moses said, 'How shall I speak to them? What will I say?' God said, 'I'll tell you what to say.' Then Moses had another objection. 'But what if they don't listen to me?' God said, 'Then I will arise and bare my holy arm.'"

The point is never who you and I are, or what our gifts and limitations might be. The point is what God in all his greatness can do through an obedient life. As D.L. Moody once said: "What God can do with one life, fully surrendered to him, the world has yet to see."

Secondly if you want to develop greater obedience to ways of God's Kingdom, fasten your thoughts upon God's goodness. Let your heart become enraptured with the way He lives. He shows mercy when He could choose to get even. He keeps His promises to us when He could opt out. Jesus put obedience to the Father's redeeming will above the expedience of His own comfort, and **"for the joy set before Him endured even the cross."** (Heb 12:2).

When I look at the magnificence of Christ's life, I think: "I want that life living in me, Lord. Fill me with your Spirit. Help me take this next step of obedience in this relationship, in that challenge, toward that goal." Do you realize that YOU too were made for the summit, for the blessed discipline Jesus displays?

During the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, British sprinter, Derek Anthony Redmond, tore a hamstring on the backstretch of the 400-meter race and, to the gasp of the crowd, fell face down on the track. Struggling to his feet, Redman began hopping toward the finish line. Suddenly, an older man bounded out of the stands and onto the track. Approaching the struggling athlete, the man embraced him. Then Derek's father said: "Come on, Son, let's finish this race together." And that they did, as the crowd exploded in a standing ovation.

I don't know where you are on the journey today, what challenges you face, what help you need. What I do know is that this help is there for you – as it was for Joseph long ago when he struggled to keep going. For as the prophet Isaiah foretold, this child who comes to us at Christmas, is **"Immanuel – God with us"** (Isaiah 7:14; Matt 1:23).

He really is with us. Christ comes from the mountaintop of a Kingdom that operates by far better principles than the ones which have become commonplace here. He knows what it is to be fully surrendered to God – to run the best possible race here and to cross the finish line. And, with your Heavenly Father, he comes alongside you today. He throws his arms around you and says to you: Listen to me. Live by the principles of my kingdom. Lean on me and let's finish this race together.

Let us pray...

Together with the Psalmist we say: "Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3,7,19).

Lord, some of us today have been hurt badly by someone. We want to get even. Maybe there's more to the story of the other person's actions than we know. Maybe not. In either case, if it is Your will, help us to show mercy.

Some of us are in relationships where we think very seriously of escaping before it gets worse. Help us to keep our promises, to remain faithful until it gets better.

Some of us are living merely expedient lives, Lord. We've shunned sacrifice and discipline, failing to see that it is we who were losing it. Help us to set forth today on a new journey of obedience.

In the power of Your Spirit and the name of the Savior, we pray. Amen.

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