

GOD'S GREATEST GIFT: "THE RECIPIENTS"

(Matthew 1:1-16)

11.29.20

INTRODUCTION/SERIES

So now we start Christmas. So, hands up, how many of you have received a Christmas list from somebody? I've received three so far. As any of thousands of ads will tell you, what is more basic to Christmas than gifts?

But what makes up a gift? Well actually, several things: You need a recipient, you need a giver, and you need a gift. And, regarding gifts, those generally come in two directions: something that somebody wants or something somebody needs. A gift usually takes thought and planning because the giver of the gift wants the gift to not only match the wants or needs of the recipient but also to reflect the heart of the one giving the gift. And someplace in there, you actually need to be able to afford the gift you have in mind.

But for "God's Greatest Gift" - the name of this year's Christmas series - before we consider anything else, we need to view everything we're going to be talking about through one particular filter: a filter called "grace" - undeserved favor. And few things express God's grace more eloquently than the famous words penned by John Newton that became one of the most famous songs in all of Christianity - "Amazing Grace" - including some definition to some of the words we sing so easily but have maybe never really thought about:

Amazing (causing great surprise or wonder; astonishing) grace! How sweet the sound - That saved a wretch (a despicable or contemptible person) like me! I once was lost (unable to find one's way; not knowing one's whereabouts) but now am found, Was blind (lacking perception, awareness, or discernment) but now I see.

That's where the story of Christmas - the story of God's greatest gift - has to start: "amazing grace" in the face of rebellion and sin. Amazing grace paints the picture of God's heart despite us, not because of us. And nobody knew that better, or represented that grace clearer, than John Newton.

John Newton lived a rough-and-tumble life, in and out of trouble, eventually becoming the captain of slave ships. He once described his life as "libertine," which means, according to Oxford: "a person, especially a man, who behaves without moral principles or a sense of responsibility." His youth was spent aboard many ships (starting at age 11), living recklessly and often drunk; as he himself wrote, his life was one of "*unsettled behavior and impatience of restraint.*" He remained arrogant and insubordinate, and he lived with moral abandon; in his own words: "*I sinned with a high hand, and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others.*"

Newton had been taught the Bible by his mother, who had unfortunately died when he was seven. Now, many years and difficulties later, he had begun to return to Scripture and had, in fact, been struck by a passage from the book of Proverbs which states: ***Because I have called, and ye refused ... I also will laugh at your calamity - Proverbs 1:24a, 26a (KJV).*** He had also

been reading the famous devotional written by Thomas a Kempis in the first part of the 1400's, *The Imitation Of Christ*, and had been impacted by his talking about the "uncertain continuance of life."

But it was on a ship that had actually rescued him from his own enslavement by an African princess that he had an experience that dramatically changed him. Off the coast of Ireland, that ship was caught in a massive storm that threatened to sink it. As the storm grew in intensity, Newton frantically prayed for rescue, and God graciously provided by shifting the cargo in the hold to miraculously plug a hole in the ship's hull, allowing the ship to maintain itself and eventually drift to safety. Now while even he admits that conversion was a process, over time his life was transformed by Christ to the point that, in agony over his days as a slave ship captain, he became one of England's strongest voices against the slave trade, which was abolished in 1807 - just a few months before his death.

But as he looked back over his life, the "amazing grace" that he had experienced in God's answer to his desperate prayers caused him to explain God's love to him in a poem, written in 1772 with the original title, "Faith's Review And Expectation." Later, in 1835, a man by the name of William Walker merged those words with the music of a popular song entitled "New Britain" - and a hymn of virtually unmatched popularity was born. It is estimated that the song "Amazing Grace" is performed as many as 10 million times a year and has been a part of over 11,000 albums. A recording by American singer and songwriter Judy Collins in the early 1970s spent 67 weeks on the pop charts in America, peaking at No. 5. But as famous as the words of that hymn are, perhaps just as famous should be the words of Newton's self-penned epitaph that found their way onto his tomb: *Once an infidel and libertine a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our LORD and SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.* In the case of John Newton, he had no doubt as to the amazing grace Christ had shown him!

Now this morning, as we begin what for many of us is an annual journey through scriptures and stories that are very familiar, we need to pray for a vision and a heart that makes these stories resonate in us like we are hearing them for the first time. There will always be so much that we can learn, and embrace, and praise, in these familiar "**good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people**" - **Luke 2:10b (KJV)**. And as we move forward, we also need to pray that the filter of "amazing grace" stays tightly bound to our hearts and our minds so that we never forget the heart behind "God's Greatest Gift." So, as we begin, let's start our journey out with **a word of prayer.**

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

So first up for us is looking at the receivers of gifts: the recipients. Now as human beings we most often view the world through the idea of performance-based rewards. We receive something in acknowledgement of what we've done or how we are. But that flies in the face of "amazing grace" - undeserved favor. So obviously there is something else in play that still allows for a gift and a recipient. Matthew will be our initial guide as we begin looking at the whole concept of being a "recipient." And it's the first chapter of his gospel

that will get us going, so let's begin.

TEXT/ANALYSIS

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham - Matthew 1:1.

This is actually a wonderful verse for what it doesn't say. Just like the OT scriptures never bring the existence of God up for debate, in the same way Matthew never suggests that the Messiahship of Jesus is in any kind of dispute. What he is about to present is about Jesus who, as sure as He is presented as the son of David and Abraham, just as surely He is presented as the Messiah. In fact, in the genealogy that He presents, we get to see a microcosm of the entire history of Israel: (1) the origin of Israel (Abraham), (2) the kingship provided for Israel (David), (3) kingship and homeland lost (the Babylonian exile), and (4) the kingship of Israel restored (in Jesus, the Christ). As Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, such a diagram would be completely appropriate.

And there is a second reason why Matthew's genealogy is so important. There is a world that exists where the issue of "pedigree" is very important. By definition, pedigree means "the record of descent of an animal, showing it to be purebred." This is incredibly important in the world of dog shows and horse racing. The line of pedigree hints to somebody the worth and quality of an animal based on these bloodlines. It's a bow to future expectations. Remember the racehorse Secretariat? First "Triple Crown" winner in 25 years when he ran so well in the spring of 1973. He was such an extraordinary animal that, even before he ran any of those Triple Crown races, he was syndicated for \$6.08 million dollars (32 shares at \$190,000 per share) (\$35 million in 2019 dollars), all because it was assumed that such a superhorse would breed more superhorses.

Also, in high society, pedigree matters in terms of family affiliation. My telling somebody that I'm a member of a certain family from a certain place would signal that I rightfully belong in such high-society circles. A great example of this is found in the movie "Titanic" when John Jacob Astor IV, the richest man on the ship, is introduced to "Jack Dawson," the globetrotting, homeless character played by Leonardo DiCaprio. He asks Jack if he was connected to the "Boston Dawson's," assuming, of course, that to dine with such high society in the first-class salon he must have such a family pedigree. And, of course, this practice also shows itself in family lines of royalty that still exist in the world.

Now think about that as we look at the "pedigree" if you will that Matthew shows us. While "Messiah" denotes power and glory and righteousness and divinity, the people He is about to link to that Messiah are decidedly very "un-Messiah like." In fact, some of the backstories are amazing when you consider they all have a human connection to the One who would be the Messiah. So, let's take a closer look at Christ's "pedigree."

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers - Matthew 1:2.

Abraham became the father of the Jewish nation. He was the one to whom God said: ***"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"*** - God

speaking, Genesis 12:2, 3b. He placed such great faith in God that the book of Genesis tells us: *[He] believed the Lord, and [the Lord] credited it to him as righteousness - Genesis 15:6.* He was even willing to sacrifice his son of promise, Isaac, because of his trust in God to provide. Yet Abraham also lied - twice - to the rulers of nations he was in because he was married to an attractive woman and didn't trust that God could protect them going forward. And speaking of trust: When God's amazing promise of an heir didn't seem to be moving quick enough, Abraham and Sarah devised a quicker plan to bring about an heir: Sarah told Abraham to take her servant-girl Hagar and make an heir through her. When Hagar gave birth to a son, God told Abraham that no, God didn't need help with His plans and promises, and that the nation to come from Abraham would indeed come through him and Sarah.

Isaac tried to play the same "I'm afraid of losing my beautiful wife" game as his father had played, trying it with a king of the Philistines, again showing a deplorable lack of faith in the promises of God. Jacob's very name means "deceiver," which he proved to be a very good name by cheating his brother Esau out of his birthright and then deceiving his own father to clinch his brother's birthright for himself.

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram - Matthew 1:3.

Judah, Jacob's fourth son, performed his own deception, keeping his Canaanite daughter-in-law Tamar from having children with his younger sons after his older son had died, following that up by being intimate with her himself when she deceived Judah into thinking she was a prostitute; the twins Perez and Zerah were the result.

Ram the father of Aminadab, Aminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David - Matthew 1:4-6a.

Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho. Ruth was a woman from Moab, a nation whose ancestry goes back to the son of an incestuous relationship between Abraham's nephew Lot and his oldest daughter.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife - Matthew 1:6b.

David, despite all the times he saw God work through him, despite being described as "*a man after [the Lord's] own heart*" - *Samuel speaking to King Saul, I Samuel 13:14a*, was guilty of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and adultery in taking another's man's wife for himself and then killing that man to cover up. And yet that woman also became the mother of arguably the wisest man of all time - Solomon - who also presided over the greatest national prosperity in Israel's history. But Solomon also destroyed himself through the influence of so many foreign wives that undermined and very probably destroyed his relationship with God: ***King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter - Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned***

his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done - I Kings 11:1-2, 4-6.

In the next five verses we get to a group of guys that were all kings of Judah, ruling over the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin following the civil war that occurred after the death of Solomon: *Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon - Matthew 1:7-11.* So, what do we know about these guys?

Rehoboam - *He did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the Lord - II Chronicles 12:14.*

Abijah - *He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been - I Kings 15:3.*

Asa - *Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done....*

Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life - I Kings 15:11, 14b.

Jehoshaphat - *In everything he followed the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord - I Kings 22:43a.*

Jehoram - *He followed the ways of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for he married a daughter of Ahab. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord - II Chronicles 21:6.*

Uzziah - *He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord - II Chronicles 26:4a.*

Jotham - *He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Uzziah had done - II Kings 15:34.*

Ahaz - *[H]e did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites - II Kings 16:2b-3.*

Hezekiah - *He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done.... Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following Him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses.... This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God's temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered - II Kings 18:3, 5-6; II Chronicles 31:20-21.*

Manasseh - *He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. ... He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing His anger. ... [But when taken captive by*

the king of Assyria] In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to Him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so He brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel - II Kings 21:2, 6; II Chronicles 33:12-13, 15-16.

Amon – He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. He followed completely the ways of his father, worshiping the idols his father had worshiped, and bowing down to them. He forsook the Lord, the God of his ancestors, and did not walk in obedience to him. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord; Amon increased his guilt – II Kings 21:20-22; II Chronicles 33:23.

Josiah - He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left - II Chronicles 34:2.

Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) - He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father had done - II Kings 24:9. He reigned only three months before King Nebuchadnezzar took him captive to Babylon.

The last five verses are made up of relatively anonymous figures - their existence only known because of their inclusion in this genealogy: *After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah - Matthew 1:12-16.* The only exception to this is Zerubbabel, who led the first return of the Jews to Judah after their exile to Babylon and oversaw the work of rebuilding the temple.

APPLICATION

OK, so what's it all mean? One glorious, overriding thing: The Kingdom of God is meant for EVERYBODY- regardless of background, regardless of sin, regardless of any preconceived notions. Christmas - the birth of God's Son - is a present envisioned for everybody. Nobody is outside of God's amazing grace!

That's why Matthew's genealogy is so important. Look who's included - people who:

- 1) Lied
- 2) Didn't trust
- 3) Cheated
- 4) Deceived
- 5) Lived immorally
- 6) Foreigners/Gentiles (non-Jews)
- 7) Betrayed
- 8) Murdered

9) Rejected God.

In other words, they are all sinners - just like us. They are us - and yet they had a hand in the greatest, most consequential birth of all time. And added into that mix were people that most would consider important - kings, for instance - alongside people who, if Matthew hadn't included them in this genealogy, wouldn't have ever even been heard of.

And we have a number of woman - incredibly significant, and incredibly rare: Since Israel was a patriarchal society, women were almost never found in these kinds of lists. But look at the women who are included - every bit as much a part of Christ's human lineage as any of the men:

- 1) Judah's Canaanite daughter-in-law Tamara, who deceived and seduced her father-in-law into believing she was simply a nameless, faceless prostitute.
- 2) Rahab, a Canaanite working as a prostitute in the city of Jericho - the first city to feel God's judgment through the nation of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land.
- 3) Ruth, a Moabitess, coming from a land that God through Moses had warned Israel about ever having any relationship with (Deuteronomy 23:3).
- 4) Bathsheba, who committed adultery with the king of Israel, and
- 5) Mary, the mother of Jesus, a nobody living in the middle of nowhere. Three, and possibly four, of those women weren't even God's people. They were Gentiles - outsiders to all of God's promises. But their inclusion reminds us that, because of Jesus Christ, there are no outsiders to God's promises.

And all these people, despite their superficial differences, had one overriding thing in common: They're all in the line of Christ's human ancestry. And they also create a "this is what our audience and our mission field look like" picture. Paul said it so well: ***[I]n Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise - Paul, Galatians 3:26-29.***

CONCLUSION

Today, more than ever, this is the message that we need to bring into the world. This is why relationship is so important, and why divisiveness, or anything that speaks to our supposed differences, is so wrong. This is why we simply cannot, whether because of politics or race or any other issue, ever consider anybody to be an enemy - somebody we absolutely want nothing to do with. Our mission is to tell people that, as Paul, said, ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - Paul, I Timothy 1:15a.*** People are either lost in their sin or found in Christ. Those are the only two options. And the only thing that is ever going to change this world is going to be for us, as Christians, dropping our love for the now - this world - and falling in love with the future - eternity in God's kingdom. That's the whole purpose for God's giving us his greatest gift - to bring people into His wonderful love. This Christmas, as we look ahead to more stories of "God's Greatest Gift," will you join with me in committing everything we have to bringing that gift into the hearts and lives of anybody and everybody who needs it? Let's pray!