

“A List!”

Grace and peace are yours from God our Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Well, I hope I'm not committing sermon suicide but the text for tonight's message is that reading we heard earlier from Matthew 1. I've never actually preached on a list of genealogy so you're my test audience. I know it's likely that no one will get up and leave because it just wouldn't be polite, but I wouldn't be surprised if some of you aren't wishing you could.

As I was preparing to read that section of Matthew tonight, I couldn't help thinking how much like a telephone book it is. Does anyone remember those things? Does anyone even use them anymore? Well, tonight's sermon is based on reading that's about as exciting as one. But I'm hoping that, after this sermon is through, you'll see that this list tells us something very important about family life. After all, that's the theme for our Advent series this year – “Family Life.” The last two weeks we focused on Luke's Gospel, learning a little about Herod's family as well as the family of Zechariah, Elizabeth the mother and father of John the Baptist.

So here's the take away for you tonight about family – lower your expectations. Believe it or not, the goal for tonight's message is lower your family expectations.

All too often, we hold children, spouses, in-laws, cousins, aunts and uncles to impossibly high standards. We may say we don't expect them to be perfect but, the reality is that our standard is so close, it's really what we're asking of them. And when they don't measure up to our expectations we say things like: “After what you just did, I can't believe you're my son!” “Are you ever going to get it right?” “Do I have to show you everything?” “You're certainly not the person I thought I married!”

But in the midst of all this trauma and turmoil Matthew's genealogy says, “Lower your family expectations.” And he does it with a list, a list of Jesus' relatives.

Tamar was the mother of Perez by Jacob's son, Judah. And the way she became a mother was by dressing like a woman of the night. She's first mentioned in Genesis 38: “*Judah took*

a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.” But Er died without leaving an heir, so, according to custom, his father, Judah, gave Tamar to another son named Onan. But then Onan died. So Judah told Tamar to wait until his youngest son grew up. Since he was very young, that would have been many years, but Judah was hoping Tamar would be dead and gone before that day came because he was afraid his last son would also die.

So Tamar went back to her own family, believing she would never marry again. But then Judah’s wife died and when he went out of town on a business trip, Tamar dressed up like a woman of the night and met him along the way. Not knowing she was Tamar, Judah propositioned her. Tamar asks for payment and Judah promised her a young goat. They sleep together. They both go their own way and Tamar conceives. And this is how Tamar ends up as one of Jesus’ family members!

Well, it’s bad enough that Tamar dressed like a woman of the night in order to fool her father-in-law but a couple of generations later in Jesus’ genealogy we meet Rahab. Rahab didn’t just dress like a woman of the night, she really was one, a pagan Canaanite one at that.

If it wasn’t bad enough that this ancestor worshiped the detestable gods Baal and Asherah at one time, another woman who made Jesus’ list, Ruth, was a Moabite, whose people paid homage to a god named Chemosh who demanded child sacrifice. We know she was a Moabite because she’s described as such six times in the book of that bears her name.

Just a little farther down the line comes Bathsheba who was an adulteress. This seems to be so unsettling that Matthew can’t even bring himself to write her name. Instead he simply calls her “*the wife of Uriah.*” You know the story. It was springtime and King David, instead of going off to war, takes a walk on the palace roof. He saw a beautiful woman bathing, found out who she was, sends for her, takes her in, and the two sleep together. Shortly thereafter Bathsheba sends a short message to the king: “*I’m pregnant.*” David orders her husband Uriah to return from the battle for a little R & R so he can make it look like the child is Uriah’s. When he refused to sleep with his own wife because he didn’t think it was fair to the other soldiers that

he's given this privilege, little does Uriah know that it would mean a death sentence. David ordered his general to make sure Uriah was killed in battle to try to hide his own sin.

Tamar dressed up to look like a woman of the night. Rahab was a woman of the night and a Canaanite. Ruth was a Moabite and Bathsheba not only bathes openly but is later instrumental in the death of one of David's sons – Adonijah. That's quite a family tree!

Thankfully the men are better – not! We already heard what David did. And his son, Solomon had seven-hundred wives and three-hundred mistresses. But even worse he worshiped a multitude of foreign gods and even enslaved the people to build his palace and God's temple. Solomon's son Rehoboam brought civil war on the nation. And a few generations later we meet Manasseh who, according to 2 Kings 21, *"shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end."*

Now, I thought the purpose of a biblical genealogy was to give solemn honor to the final descendant – in Matthew's case, Jesus. So why doesn't Matthew tell of Israel's three lovely patriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel? Why doesn't he just skirt around names like Solomon, Rehoboam, and Manasseh?

Clearly Matthew doesn't introduce us to the finest in Jesus' family. Instead he shines a spotlight on the Eddies. Eddie was the brother-in-law of Clark Griswold. By doing this Matthew, deliberately highlights the diseased and distorted branches of the family tree.

What do you do with your not-so-perfect relatives? You certainly don't brag about 'em. It's much easier to speak poorly of them. Act like they don't exist. Hold a grudge when they do you wrong or embarrass you. That's what we do. But that's not what Jesus does.

When Joseph was about to divorce Mary because he was convinced she had the character of a Tamar or Rahab, Matthew writes that the angel told him, *"Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* "Jesus" means "the Lord saves." Jesus saves His people. And who are his people? Tamar, who deceived Judah. Rahab, who sold herself to men. Ruth, who grew up

worshiping a violent and murderous god. Bathsheba, who left Uriah for David. Solomon, who began so good only to finish so bad. Rehoboam, who ripped a nation in two. And blood-thirsty Manasseh. These are the ones Jesus' died for.

So what's the point – or at least one of the points – of Matthew's genealogy? *Lower your expectations!* Take your list of unrealistic family expectations and tear it up. Let go of your impossible demands, your absurd assumptions, your ungodly ultimatums and replace them with forgiveness; the forgiveness Jesus won for you by giving His all on the cross

Jesus' death certainly points to the fact that He loved sinners, loved them enough to die for them. But He also showed it throughout His life as He walked those dusty roads of Judea. He purposely chose fishermen instead of Pharisees, tax-collectors, harlots and other sinners instead of Sadducees. Ultimately, Jesus chose thorns for a crown instead of silver and gold. His choices led to torment, torture and death – all for the family of mankind.

But if His genealogy is shocking, His death led to the greatest shock of all. *“Don't be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, he is risen, as he said.”* Jesus conquered death and is making all things new. He has chosen you and His promise is to make a new you, too.

Yes, Matthew 1:1–17 reads like a telephone book that contains names no one cares about. It's a part of the Bible no one in their right mind would read in church or preach on. But to those of us who know what it's like to expect perfection in our families, Matthew's list means letting go of unrealistic expectations and replacing them with forgiveness, a clean slate, and a new beginning. And that's why Matthew's list means *everything*, everything for families like yours and mine! Amen.