

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 19, 2010**

**THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS:
A CLOSER LOOK**

Matthew 1:1-6

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Weren't we blessed last Sunday by the Choir and orchestra as they so beautifully presented the Christmas message of the coming of the Son of God – the promised Savior and Messiah – “from prophecy to fulfillment”? I know I was blessed. I don't know about you, but “I heard the prophet callin’,” and “I heard the people singin’.” We *were* blessed. We *are* blessed to have so many musical gifts in our church family, so many members of the family who are willing to use their gifts to bring glory to God, to enrich our worship, and to communicate the message of God's great love and power through music. We are richly blessed. And I am grateful to Adam (Rice) and the Choir and all of our instrumentalists for all you do to bring us to a deeper awareness of God's presence, glory and grace. Thank you!

Two Sundays ago, I did something I had never done before. I preached a sermon on the family tree of Jesus. My guess is that you haven't heard many sermons on the genealogy of Jesus, or any other genealogy passage in the Bible. You may think I'm crazy, but I decided that one message on Jesus' family tree isn't enough. I think there is a lot more of spiritual value and insight there, way more than we can talk about today. But I do want to talk about it this morning. So, I invite you to turn once again in your Bible, or in one of the pew Bibles, as we take a closer look at the genealogy of Jesus found at the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. The Scripture reading is Matthew 1:1-6. It is just a portion of the genealogical record given by Matthew in his introduction to the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word.

THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS: A TOOL FOR EVANGELISM

If you wonder what's the big deal about the genealogies in the Bible, like the genealogies of Jesus here in Matthew 1 and over in Luke 3, and why they are important, here is one reason: God sometimes uses these genealogies to bring unbelievers to faith in the Lord Jesus. As we said two weeks ago, *all* of Scripture is God-breathed, *all* of it is inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16), and God can use even the genealogies to sovereignly draw individuals who do not yet believe in Him to a genuine, personal, saving faith in His Son Jesus Christ. It is true. In the providence of God, even a boring old genealogy, a list of who begat whom, can be a tool for evangelism.

Don't believe me? Here is an example: David Fischler, the pastor of the COVE (Church of the Occoquan Valley), the mission church we started a few years ago that meets each Sunday in Woodbridge. Some of you know his story. He gave me permission to share this with you. David was raised in a secular Jewish home in New Jersey. His parents were not devout Jews. The Fischlers were the Jewish equivalent of what we call “C-E Christians” – you know,

people who only come to church twice a year, on Christmas and Easter. The Fischlers were like that. They only went to synagogue twice a year. Not Christmas and Easter, but Passover and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). They were Jewish by ancestry and heritage. But the Jewish faith was not an integral part of their daily lives as David was growing up.

Then David went off to college, where he encountered Christians (maybe for the first time in his life) who were vocal and passionate about their faith. David was (and is) an accomplished debater, and he took every opportunity to shoot down the claims of these Christians on campus. The trouble was, David didn't really know exactly what Christians believe. So, God used a young woman in whom he was interested, Maryanne was her name, to point him to the Bible. David and Maryanne were on the debate team together. When David would express his disdain for Christianity, Maryanne used her knowledge of debate strategy to challenge David to find out what Christians really believe by reading the Bible. She reasoned with him that if he were going to debate Christians and seriously try to refute their beliefs, he should first become more familiar with what Christians believe and why. The best way to do that, she told him, was to read the Bible. Which was something that, as a secular Jew, he had never done. Not even the Old Testament.

David took her up on the challenge and started in Genesis. He read the entire Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi, which, of course, are the Scriptures of the Jewish people. Then David turned the page from Malachi to Matthew, from the Old Testament to the New, and read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. When he did, a light went on. He made a startling discovery that would change his life. He discovered that Jesus was actually Jewish! That may not seem like a startling discovery to you. You may think "Duh." You may think that everybody knows Jesus was Jewish. But David didn't know that. He had always assumed Jesus was a Gentile (non-Jewish), since just about all His followers who call themselves Christians are Gentiles. Reading the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and discovering the lineage of Jesus from the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through the royal line of King David, was a huge turning point for David. It opened his eyes to the fact that Jesus was and is the Messiah God promised to the Jews, the Savior God sent to redeem and govern His people in righteousness and peace.

God used the genealogy of Jesus to remove the scales from David's eyes so he could see who Jesus really is. God used this list of the family line of Jesus to give birth to saving faith in David's heart, to enable him to embrace Jesus as the true Messiah, the Savior and sovereign Lord in his life. It was not the only thing God used in David's journey, of course, but discovering the Jewish ancestry of Jesus had a major impact in his coming to faith in Christ.

So, you see, one reason the genealogies are in the Bible is their evangelistic value. Praise God – praise the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Judah and Perez his son, the God of Salmon and Rahab, the God of Boaz and Ruth, the God of Obed and Jesse and David and Joseph and Mary – praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom all blessings flow, and to whom all praise and honor and glory belong!

Listen to what the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1. This is without question one of the most magnificent and spiritually rich passages in the entire Bible. Ephesians 1:3-8: *"Praise*

be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He (God the Father) chose us in Him (Christ the Son) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He (God the Father) predestined us to be adopted as His [children] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His (the Father's) pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He (the Father) has freely given us in the One (the Son) He loves. In Him (the Son) we have redemption through His (the Son's) blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He (the Father) lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

In Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, whose ancestry goes back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is descended from the tribe of Judah and the royal line of David, all these spiritual blessings of redemption and forgiveness and the riches of God's grace are given to all, like David Fischler and, I trust, like you and me, who put our faith and hope in Him – in Christ – alone for our salvation. Not only did God use the genealogy of Jesus as part of His plan to accomplish our salvation in history. He has used, and continues to use, the genealogy as a tool to answer objections, to correct misconceptions, and to open the eyes of people like David Fischler to the reality of who Jesus is.

SURPRISES IN THE FAMILY TREE

David Fischler was surprised to discover the Jewishness of Jesus. What surprised him may not surprise you, but there are some other surprising things in the family tree of Jesus. One of the most surprising things about the genealogy in Matthew 1 is the inclusion of five women in it. Ordinarily, the names of women were not included in ancient Jewish genealogies. It was a patriarchal society, and women, unfortunately, were not accorded the same respect, dignity and rights as men. It was so unusual to include the names of women that, according to William Barclay, the presence of these women in the genealogy of Jesus is nothing short of extraordinary.

It gets even more surprising when you see who these women are. In verse 16, there is Mary, pregnant out of wedlock, who would give birth to Jesus the Messiah in the fullness of God's time (Galatians 4:4). The others are:

- Tamar (verse 3)
- Rahab (verse 5)
- Ruth (verse 5)
- Bathsheba, identified not by name but only as “Uriah's wife” (verse 6)

Three of these women were Gentiles. Tamar, the widowed daughter-in-law of Jacob's son Judah, was a Canaanite (Genesis 38). Rahab was a Canaanite as well. She was a prostitute in the city of Jericho (Joshua 2). Ruth was from Moab, a neighboring nation and people who were mostly despised by the people of Israel. Of these four (not counting Mary), only Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of the “mighty men” in David's army, was a Jew. And we know it is not because of her marriage to Uriah, but in spite of their marriage, that Bathsheba is included in the genealogy of Jesus.

This brings us to another fact about His genealogy that may or may not surprise you. There are some really shady branches in Jesus' family tree. Some of the ancestors of Jesus did some really terrible things. They committed some really serious sins. In a sermon preached in 1522, Martin Luther said that Jesus is the "kind of person who is not ashamed of sinners – in fact, He even puts them in His family tree!" How true! The family tree of Jesus is filled with sinners. You will find only the names of unworthy people in the genealogy of Jesus. From Abraham on – or, even more, if you look at the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3, from Adam, our first father, on, after Adam and Eve plunged all of us into our fallen condition, only the names of sinners appear in the genealogy of Jesus. Like us, everyone in the family line of Jesus is a sinner who needs a Savior, someone in need of the salvation from sin that only Jesus can give.

Judah, for example, was no great saint. Neither, of course, was his father Jacob. When he and his brothers kidnapped their brother Joseph with the intention of killing him, it was Judah's idea to sell him as a slave instead. Not as bad as taking Joseph's life, but not something to brag about either. Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:3) mentions Perez and Zerah, the sons of Judah born to his daughter-in-law Tamar. If that is all you know about it, you can still tell there is something wrong here. The full story is found in Genesis 38. Tamar was married to Judah's son Er, but they had no children. After Er's death, Tamar became the wife of Er's brother Onan, but he refused to fulfill his duty to his deceased brother to have children with Tamar. Then Onan died, leaving Tamar a widow again. Judah had a third son, Shelah, but he was too young to become her husband. Years passed. Tamar's biological clock was ticking. Time was running out for her. And she felt forsake, for even though Shelah was now old enough to marry, Tamar had been forgotten.

When she learned that Judah's wife had died, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law in the hope of becoming pregnant and bearing a child. Her trickery worked. Judah gave in to his lust and slept with her. But he did not know it was Tamar. She became pregnant with twins. When Judah was told that his daughter-in-law was guilty of prostitution and was now pregnant, he wanted to throw the book at her. He said she should be put to death for what she had done. But he changed his tune when he was exposed as the man who had made her pregnant. Tamar gave birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah. One of them, Perez, the circumstances of his birth and the sinful acts of his parents notwithstanding, is a direct ancestor of the Lord Jesus. You're telling me that God would include characters like Judah and Tamar in the family tree of the promised Messiah? You bet.

Then there is Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho. How in the world did she end up in the genealogy of Jesus? Liz Curtis Higgs devotes a chapter to Rahab in her book *Bad Girls of the Bible*. Who knows all the skeletons of sin she had in her closet? Who knows all the men she had slept with? But then two Israelite spies sent by Joshua showed up at her door and what did she do? She hid them from the Jericho police. She lied to protect them. She helped them escape through a window in the wall of the city. Rahab knew that God was with the people of Israel. She had heard about what God had done for them when He brought them out of Egypt. She knew that the LORD was the true God. She knew Jericho was about to be given into the hands of the Israelites. She professed her faith in God to the spies, and then acted on her faith, for which she is praised in the New Testament, in both Hebrews 11:31, where she is included in the faith "hall of fame," and James 2:25, where she is lauded as an example of

living faith. Rahab had plenty of sin in her past, but she walked away from her old life. Unlike the wife of Lot, who looked back with sadness and longing as the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were being destroyed, Rahab didn't look back when she and her family were rescued by the spies and led out of Jericho as its walls came a-tumblin' down. She left everything behind, including her life as a prostitute. She put her trust in God and became part of the people of Israel. Rahab was no longer the person she had been. By the grace of God, through the gift of faith, she became a new person. No longer just attractive on the outside, but beautiful on the inside, too. She married a direct descendant of Judah named Salmon. They had a son named Boaz, who would later marry Ruth, the widowed Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi. Boaz and Ruth were blessed with a son named Obed, who had a son named Jesse, who was the father of David.

Liz Curtis Higgs says of Rahab that God turned "a harlot into a holy vessel, entrusting her with the very genes that would one day produce the King of kings." Isn't that amazing? John MacArthur says that Rahab is "a living reminder that even the worst of sinners can be redeemed" by the grace and power of God.

The grace of God is extended to the worst of sinners – to Judah and Tamar, to Rahab, to David and Bathsheba (there's not enough time to talk about their sin), to all the other unworthy sinners who make up the family tree of Jesus, and to sinners like you and me. MacArthur is right when he says that "scandal colored so much of the messianic line." But here is the thing: God chose them, in spite of their sins and flaws. And God used great sinners, both men and women, in carrying out His plan to send His Son into our world to save great sinners like us.

The next time you come across one of the genealogies of Jesus, or any of the genealogies in the Bible, remember that. Remember how God extended His mercy and grace to every person who was given the privilege of being included in Jesus' family. And never forget how God has extended His mercy and grace to you.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.