

Matthew 1:18-2:12 — Christmas Is About Worship

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Christmas is filled with contrasts.

- Christmas is about baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and wise men at a manger scene. Somehow Santa and his reindeer delivering presents from the North Pole were mixed with the biblical story. That is a big contrast. How did they end up together?
- Our culture tells us Christmas is about Santa Claus giving presents to everyone who has been good. The Bible tells us Christmas is about Jesus giving us the greatest present of all, but only when we realize we have been bad. How did those contrasting messages end up together?

Tonight, we are going to look at contrasts in the Christmas story from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew's Christmas contrasts teach us what true worship looks like, not just on the night Jesus was born, but in our lives tonight.

Let's read the Christmas story from Matthew's Gospel and see what Matthew's Christmas characters teach us about worship.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to

Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ” Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Matthew 1:18–2:12 (ESV)

If you want to sell your house, you have an appraiser take a look at it. The appraiser helps you determine the value of your home. If you are going to sell your car, you look at Kelly Blue Book. It helps you determine the value of your vehicle.

Tonight, God invites us to appraise him. He invites us to set a value him.

How do we set a value on God? The way we worship Jesus reveals the value we place on Jesus. The way we worship Jesus reveals the gratitude we have in our hearts toward Jesus. If our appraisal of Jesus low, our worship will be low. If our appraisal of Jesus is high, our worship will be high.

The Christmas story shows us the way three people worshipped Jesus. It tells us the truth about what they felt about Jesus. This is instructive for us. Just as their worship when Jesus was born revealed the truth about their hearts, the way we worship Jesus reveals the truth about the way our hearts feel about Jesus too.

Why should we value Jesus highly and worship him?

Maybe the best place to begin is answering the “Why” question. Why should we worship Jesus in the first place? Why is Jesus worthy of our worship and gratitude? Matthew’s Christmas story gives us the answer.

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). Matthew 1:23 (ESV)

What makes Jesus worthy of our worship? Jesus is God. Jesus is the one who created the universe. He loves us so much that he became one of us in the universe. He fused himself with a human body forever. Jesus is God in the flesh. The reason Jesus became a man was because Jesus loves us. He came to die for us. He came to suffer all of the punishment we deserve for our sin so we do not have to pay for our sin. Jesus didn’t just come to die and take our punishment but he came to rise to new life after he died. He offers to give us a new life when we trust in him. Jesus came to make us into new people, new creations, right now! When we trust in him, Jesus supernaturally makes us into such different people that we are literally said to be born again!

Jesus loves us so much he came to take away the eternity in hell we deserve for our sin and give us an eternity in heaven with him that we don’t deserve. It is all ours simply by repenting of our sin and placing our faith and trust in Jesus to forgive our sin. Jesus does it all.

If all of that doesn’t make Jesus worthy of our affection and worship, I don’t know what else would!

What do the characters in Matthew's Christmas story teach us about worship?

In Matthew 2, we meet three different worshippers of Jesus. The three characters we are going to look at tonight are the wise men, the religious leaders, and Herod. Herod shows us someone who worships himself. The religious leaders show us empty worship. The wise men show us true worship.

The wise men show us true worship.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:1-2 (ESV)

We are told the wise men came from the east --- that is most likely Babylon. They traveled all the way to Jerusalem. That tells us a lot about their worship. They were genuine worshippers of Jesus because travel from Babylon to Jerusalem involved genuine sacrifice. It was a long trip! Google maps says the distance from Babylon to Jerusalem is 679 miles as the crow flies. It was farther on foot! That is not the trip many of us pictured. There are other parts of the wise men's story that are different from what we were told.

When we see the wise men in nativity scenes, the shepherds and three wise men are visiting Jesus on the night he was born. Newsflash! Things didn't happen that way.

First, the Bible never says there were three wise men. We get that from the number of gifts. There were three gifts --- gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So Christmas cards look balanced, we have one wise man per gift. It wouldn't look good if someone arrived empty-handed. The Bible doesn't say there were only three wise men in the Christmas story. It only says there were three gifts.

Second, the wise men were not at the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger in Bethlehem. Only the shepherds were able to see Jesus on the night he was born. Look what Matthew says it was like when the wise men finally arrived.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother... Matthew 2:11 (ESV)

Notice that the wise men went into a house, not into a stable where Jesus was laying in a manger. The wise men didn't arrive the night Jesus was born! They arrived some time after Jesus was born. In addition, when they arrived, Jesus was not an infant. He was a child. In Greek, there are different words for infant and for toddler. The word used in Matthew is the word for toddler. When the wise men arrived, it was months after Jesus was born. Some Bible scholars think it was as much as a year after Jesus was born.

Why am I telling this to you other than to ruin your nativity scenes and irritate you when you see Christmas cards? The reason I point this out is because it teaches us about the nature of true worship. It took the wise men an extraordinarily long time to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem after they saw the star on the night of Jesus' birth.

The trip was 680 plus miles without a car. Think about what that kind of travel was like in those days. There were no superhighways with Starbucks at the rest stops. They were not driving an SUV with big tires or riding in a luxury car. They were traveling on camels or horses. They couldn't travel at night. They were going up mountains and down into valleys. They were wading across rivers and trudging across deserts.

Why did these guys take months out of their lives to travel this distance and endure this travel nightmare?

To them, worshipping Jesus was worth the sacrifice.

The value we place on Christ is shown by the amount of inconvenience we are willing to endure to worship Christ.

What an appropriate message for 2020. Worshipping Jesus used to be easy. We pulled into a nice parking spot, walked into church where the coffee was hot and the cookies were fresh. Everything was convenient. Then came the pandemic. Now many of us have to watch church online. That is much harder than being at church in person. We have to brew our own coffee. Watching online takes more effort to stay engaged. It takes self-discipline to set aside time to sit down and have church at home. Online worship is a sacrifice.

It also takes more effort to stay in contact with our church family. Before the pandemic, our church family was with us in the foyer. It was easy to talk, build relationships, and encourage one another. Now staying connected with our church family is hard. We need to make phone calls. We need to call people one at a time. Worshipping Jesus in 2020 takes more sacrifice.

Remember the message of the wise men. *The genuineness of our worship is seen by how much we are willing to sacrifice for our worship.* The pandemic is not all bad for our faith. The harder it is to worship Jesus and the more we have to sacrifice for that worship, the more genuine our worship of Jesus becomes.

Let me say one more thing about the wise men. These men were from Persia. They were highly educated. They were sophisticated. They were experts in subjects such as medicine, sciences, and astrology. The wise men were not the losers of Persian society. They were the shakers and movers of Persian society. Even though they were powerful and influential people, worshipping Jesus at his birth was so important to them that they were willing to take almost a year out of their busy lives to worship Jesus. Isn't there a message in that for us?

Today, the higher up the social ladder we go, the harder it is for us to make time for worship. Often times, when we climb the social ladder, we become less willing to sacrifice. We struggle to find time to worship our Jesus because we are busy with everything else besides Jesus. The wise men left the comfort of their rich homes to travel dusty roads. They were willing to sacrifice financially to give incredibly valuable gifts to Jesus. Why did they do this? Jesus was important to them. They had no problem making a sacrifice to worship Jesus. The sacrifice of worship was a sacrifice they wanted to make. It wasn't a sacrifice they felt manipulated into.

The wise men in the Christmas story remind us that how we value Jesus shows up in what we are willing to sacrifice to worship Jesus.

In 2020, when worshipping Jesus is hard, when worshipping Jesus is inconvenient, when many churches in the country can't meet, when many Christians can't even gather for Christmas Eve, let's resolve to make whatever sacrifices we need to make in 2021 to joyfully worship Jesus. Let's appraise

Jesus highly. Like the wise men, may we say worship of Jesus is worth whatever inconvenience and sacrifice we need to make.

The religious leaders show us empty worship.

...and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' " Matthew 2:4–6 (ESV)

When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they asked Herod where they could find Jesus, the newborn king of the Jews. Herod assembled the religious leaders. These were men with a good Bible education. They had big libraries and big brains. Their brains were so big these guys looked like lollipops on a stick. When Herod asked them what the Bible said about the specifics of Jesus' birth, these Bible scholars knew the answer right away. They quoted Micah 5:2. It was a prophecy written 700 years before. It said the true king of Israel, the one who was fully man and fully God, the one who was coming to save God's people, would be born in Bethlehem.

Here is where it gets amazing. Bethlehem is only 5 miles from Jerusalem. Bethlehem is a small town, like Terril. If you live in Terril, please don't take offense. There is nothing wrong with Terril, but it is so small that if you blink, you miss it. That was Bethlehem.

The Bible experts, who had lots of Bible knowledge, knew exactly where Jesus would be born, yet they were not willing to take a little time and effort to travel 5 miles to meet and worship Jesus after he was born. The wise men, who didn't know much about the Bible, were willing to travel 680 miles to worship Jesus. The religious leaders knew their Bibles inside and out but they were not

willing to be inconvenienced when it came to worship. A simple 5-mile trip was too much of an inconvenience to worship the savior of the world.

What does this contrast reveal? *How much people are willing to sacrifice to worship Jesus reveals how much gratitude they have in their hearts for Jesus.* What was wrong with the religious leaders? The religious leaders were more in love with Bible information than they were the savior of history. They were more interested in winning a Bible trivia game than worshipping the Jesus that the Bible trivia told them about.

Here is my point. *We may know our Bibles but that doesn't mean we love Jesus.* There is a big difference between what we know about God in our heads and how we feel Jesus in our hearts. The wise men, who didn't know much Bible information, had more love and gratitude for Jesus than the brilliant Bible teachers who had all the answers.

This is a problem those of us in the church easily fall into. It is easy for us to have heads overflowing with knowledge about Jesus but to have empty hearts when it comes to love of Jesus.

How do we know if our heads are full but our hearts are empty when it comes to Jesus? How much are we willing to sacrifice when it comes to worshipping our savior? If we are not willing to be inconvenienced when it comes to worship, our heads may be full but I guarantee that our love and gratitude for Jesus is missing. We are more concerned with being inconvenienced in worship than we are in adoring Jesus in our worship.

Herod shows us self-worship.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." Matthew 2:7–8 (ESV)

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Matthew 2:16 (ESV)

What did Herod say he wanted to do? He said he wanted to find Jesus so he could worship him. In reality, he didn't want to worship Jesus. He wanted to eliminate Jesus. Herod worshipped himself.

Herod was known as the king of the Jews. When he heard a new king of the Jews was born, Herod pretended to be interested in worshipping Jesus so he could get rid of Jesus.

Herod said, "There is only room for one king in my life and that is me." Today, don't many people think about Jesus the same way? They claim they want to go to church. They claim they want to worship Jesus, but the only person they have room for in their hearts is themselves.

How do we recognize someone worshipping themselves instead of Jesus? Look at the sacrifice they are willing to make for worship. If they claim they want to worship Jesus but are not willing to make any sacrifice to worship Jesus, chances are they are worshipping themselves instead of Jesus.

When it comes to the characters in the Christmas story, which one are you?

Are you like Herod? Do you say you want to worship Jesus but there is only enough room in your heart for yourself instead of Jesus? You tell others you

want to worship Jesus but you have no desire to make any sacrifices or inconveniences in your life to do that.

If that is you, confess that to Jesus. Ask Jesus to forgive you for self-worship. Tell Jesus you want him to be at the center of your life. Tell Jesus you want to live your life to honor him instead of yourself. If that is the desire of your heart, in that moment, you will be born again. This Christmas, receive the greatest gift of all --- the love, forgiveness, and new life that comes from Jesus when we stop worshipping ourselves and start worshipping him.

Are you like the religious leaders? Do you have all the Bible information about Jesus but your heart is empty when it comes to love for Jesus? Do you find yourself turning away from worship because the inconvenience of the pandemic doesn't feel like it is worth the sacrifice?

If that is you, tonight, confess to Jesus that while your head is full of Bible knowledge your heart has grown cold when it comes to love and gratitude for Jesus. Jesus will forgive you. Resolve tonight that you will embrace whatever inconveniences of pandemic worship await us in 2021. Worship of Jesus is worth whatever sacrifices we have to endure.

Are you like the wise men? You may not know all the Bible information about Jesus but you love him. If you have to make sacrifices to worship Jesus, that is OK with you. After all Jesus has done for you --- forgiving you, saving you, and making you into a new person --- worshipping Jesus is worth whatever sacrifices you have to endure to express your love to him.

- It doesn't matter if travel is inconvenient. Jesus is worth it.

- It doesn't matter if wearing a mask is mandatory to be part of worship. Jesus is worth it.
- It doesn't matter if I have to stay home and watch church online. Jesus is worth it.

In a few days, the tree will go down. The holiday decorations will go away. December's gifts will become January's payments. When Christmas goes away, the questions of worship will remain.

Who will we worship this year? Will we worship ourselves or will we worship Jesus? Are we at the center of our lives or is Jesus? Jesus is the one came to earth to die for us and give us new life. He is worthy of all our love and affection, not us.

How will we worship this year? As lockdowns occur, when it becomes harder to get together, when everything goes online, when we are separated from one another, will we have hearts deeply in love with Jesus that joyfully embrace whatever sacrifices it takes to worship our Jesus?



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