



DAVID A. BUSIC

PERFECTLY  
IMPERFECT

CHARACTER SKETCHES FROM  
THE NEW TESTAMENT

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# 1

## INSTANT OBEDIENCE

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MATTHEW 1:18-25

He has a right to interrupt your life. He is Lord. When you accepted Him as Lord, you gave Him the right to help Himself to your life anytime He wants.

—Henry Blackaby

When our family moved to a new city, we tried using bribery to convince our children that moving was a good idea. We promised them that once we got settled, we would buy them a dog. After considerable research on the Internet (about thirty minutes), we decided to get a boxer. We named her Lucy. Because Lucy was a puppy, my wife thought it would be a good idea to take her to obedience school. I could understand spending money on piano lessons or tennis classes for the kids. But I could *not* understand paying hard-earned money to teach my dog to sit, beg, and roll over. After all, once a dog has been housebroken and taught not to eat food off the table, what more is there to learn? . . . I was so wrong!

One afternoon, when Lucy was about six months old, I took her for a walk on a jogging path near our house. We were enjoying the walk, with Lucy straining at the leash, when something caught my attention. About fifty yards in front of us was a large,

full-grown Doberman pinscher. To make matters worse, I noticed it was running free without a leash. Bringing up the rear of this jogging Doberman, and not nearly close enough, was what appeared to be his jogging owner.

Up until now the Doberman had not seen us. But then it looked our way, and its ears perked up. It must have sensed fresh meat because it suddenly took off running toward us like a greyhound chasing an electric rabbit.

It's funny what you think about when your life is on the line. Your adrenaline starts pumping, and your brain goes into full alert mode. You don't have a lot of time to think when you're being chased down by a snarling, rabies-infested attack dog.

My first inclination was to run like mad. But then I remembered what Animal Planet says to do when you're attacked by a wild animal. When being attacked by a bear, you should play dead; otherwise you risk being mauled to death. But when confronted with a mountain lion, you should raise your arms and try to look bigger than you are. Your only hope is to make the mountain lion think twice about attacking you. However, if that doesn't work, you should fight like a crazy person to stay alive, because if you play dead with a mountain lion you *will* be dead! I couldn't recall what Animal Planet had said about snarling, rabies-infested Doberman pinschers, but running didn't seem like my best option.

I've been told that animals can *sense* fear. Apparently animals can also *feel* fear, because by now Lucy had also spotted the Doberman closing the gap between us, and she was trying to climb up my leg as if it were a gym-class rope.

I decided to take my punishment like a man. I reached down and picked her up. If we were going to die, we would die together. At

least my children could write on my tombstone, “Here lies a good father and puppy protector.”

By now the Doberman was close enough for me to see the snarling, rabies-infested whites of its eyes. I braced myself for the attack. When, out of the blue, a miracle happened. I heard the jogger call out, “Down!” Instantly, the snarling, rabies-infested Doberman threw on the brakes, stopping so quickly that it skidded forward and dropped down directly in front of me. It was no more than ten feet away, lying perfectly still. I cautiously walked around the dog, Lucy in tow, and that rabid Doberman did not move a muscle. Not even the blink of an eye.

The jogging dog owner calmly ran by, smiled, and nodded his head as if he had just signed my stay of execution. I didn’t know whether to kiss him or kill him! He then gave the command “Release,” and the snarling, rabies-infested Doberman was back on its feet, trotting again as if nothing had happened and as if it never intended to kill us in the first place. That day walking, and carrying my dog, I learned the value of instant obedience.



Instant obedience is important on many fronts. It’s important in the military. To *not* instantly obey orders in combat situations can cost lives. Young recruits in boot camp are taught to obey orders no matter what and without question.

I remember reading a *Chicago Tribune* story about a young soldier at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Due to a “clerical error,” a twenty-three-year-old supply clerk named Jeff Lewis was sent with the Eighty-Second Airborne Division to parachute from an airplane. Amazingly, not only was this Lewis’s first jump, but he also had not received “any formal training.”<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, Lewis “landed

unhurt,” and when he was later queried about why he didn’t ask questions about the jump, he said he was merely following orders, as any “good soldier” should.<sup>2</sup> As far as he was concerned, if the army classified him as qualified to jump, that was good enough for him. That’s instant obedience.

Instant obedience is also important with raising children. Every now and then I hear parents say to their kids, “I’m not going to tell you again to do such and such . . . one . . . two . . . three!” Now I have to admit that I myself have even been guilty of that a time or two. But that doesn’t work very well when the kids are playing in the street and a garbage truck is barreling down the road. “Get out of the street right now. Please? One . . . two . . . three.” No! Partial or hesitant obedience isn’t quite enough in those moments. “Get out of the street now!” we shout. We want instant obedience, because without it our kids are in harm’s way.

There are times when instant obedience can be critical. Is it any wonder then that God expects instant obedience out of his children? Should it surprise us that there are those moments when the *immediacy* and *timing* of the moment are so critical that to hesitate could mean the difference between life and death?

Certainly, those kinds of moments don’t happen every day, and we are not called in every situation to follow in blind faith whatever comes our way. But there are those moments, those life-and-death moments, when to *not* instantly follow the prompting of God could mean the difference between life and death.



The life of Joseph is a good example of the crucial importance of instant obedience. The birth of Jesus is recorded in two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke. Luke portrays the Christmas

story from Mary's perspective. Matthew is the Christmas story from Joseph's perspective.

The truth is, we don't know a lot about Joseph. In fact, Joseph himself never speaks a word in the Bible. He never once opens his mouth. When Mary, his young betrothed bride, is given the news of a virgin birth, she breaks out into a song that is so eloquent we call it the Magnificat. But Joseph never utters a syllable. He is a silent Joseph. But we do know a few things about him.

First, we know his **marital situation**. Joseph and Mary are "engaged" but not yet living together. According to the customs of their time, they would have been involved in a two-stage process of marriage. The first stage was betrothal, or "engagement," but in a much stronger sense than we understand engagement. When a woman was engaged to a man in ancient Israel, she was bound to him through formal words of consent. Betrothal would often occur when a woman was very young, usually twelve or thirteen years old, while the man was generally around the age of eighteen, having worked several years to try and save some money. Following the betrothal, the couple would wait a period of time, customarily about a year, for the second stage of the process. At that point the bride would move out of her family's home and into the home of her husband. Joseph and Mary are between these two stages, and while they have not consummated their marriage, they *are* married in the eyes of their society. That is Joseph's marital situation.

We also know Joseph's **moral situation**. Matthew tells us that Joseph is a "just" or "righteous" man (see 1:19), which means that he is serious about his relationship with God. He is striving to live his life in harmony with the will of God and to follow all of the commandments of the Mosaic law to the letter. But because



Joseph *is* a righteous man, he is also facing a profound spiritual crisis. Mary is “found”<sup>3</sup> to be pregnant (v. 18), and Joseph knows that he is not the father. As far as he can tell, Mary has been unfaithful to him. And the Mosaic law is quite clear about what a man should do under those circumstances. According to the Torah, the consequences were severe (see Num. 5:11-31).

That’s a lot to consider for an eighteen- to twenty-year-old. Joseph is terribly hurt, but he is also compassionate, and out of love for Mary he decides to divorce her quietly, knowing full well that when he does, it will cast doubt on his own character. Nevertheless, he is willing to do it for Mary’s protection and reputation.

Right in the middle of this agonizing process something unexpected happens. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and reveals to him that the child in Mary’s womb is not a sin *against* God but indeed a gift *from* God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel says to Joseph, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20-21).

Now that was quite a dream. The Scriptures reveal that God often reveals himself to people through dreams. But as breathtaking as the message of that dream was, what is even more striking to me is what happens next. The text says, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife” (v. 24). Not only does Joseph *believe* this incredible news, but then he wakes up from his sleep and *immediately obeys* the instructions he’s been given!<sup>4</sup> There is no record of him arguing with God. There is no hint that he got a group of friends together to help interpret his dream. There is no allusion

of doubt; there is no confusion or hesitation. He simply hears a message from God and not only believes it but also acts on it with instant obedience. That is righteousness!

It's a little hard to believe. This wasn't a small decision. It involved his entire future. But it also wasn't the only time in Joseph's life that it happened. There are other instances. Matthew 2:13-15 is a good example: "When they [the magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' So he got up, took the child and his mother *during the night* and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod" (emphasis added).

"During the night"? That same night? Here is a man who takes the commands of God seriously. Do you see a pattern developing here? It's the pattern of instant obedience and unwavering faith. Look at the timing of Joseph's actions: When he woke up . . . that night . . . immediately! There is a sense of *holy urgency* behind Joseph's decisions. In every instance Joseph immediately obeys without argument or delay.

Again, these were not insignificant decisions. Think about it! These are major, life-altering decisions:

Marriage

Fathering a son that's not your biological child

Forsaking your credibility and social standing

Relocating your family (and not just down the street)

Giving up your financial stability

Living in another country other than your own

I've tried to imagine the scene of that last night when Joseph had the dream about Herod and moving to Egypt:

“Honey! Honey, wake up!”

“Joe? What is it?”

“Mary, I just had a dream.”

“Another dream?”

“Yeah, I’ll explain in the car. You get the kids. I’ll throw what I can into a few suitcases. But we’ve got to go!”

“Go? Go where? When?”

“Tonight . . . now!”

This was a life-altering decision! And yet Joseph responds in every situation with instant obedience. God needed a man who wouldn’t hesitate to say yes to him. Do you know why? Because the salvation of the world was in his care. Do you understand what I’m saying? Reread that last sentence.

Consider this: What would have happened if Joseph had hesitated? He certainly had good reason to hesitate. After all, this wasn’t something that happened every day for him. This whole dream sequence didn’t happen in a few weeks’ time. It probably spanned a period of several years. The first dream came before Jesus’ birth, the second dream probably happened a couple of years after Jesus was born, and other dreams even months later than that (see Matt. 2:19–22).

This kind of thing isn’t a regular experience. God doesn’t always speak so forcefully and clearly on a daily basis. But in many instances we don’t need God to do that. Much of God’s will for us is already clear. It is laid out clearly in Scripture. Doing God’s will is modeled for us by the life and ministry of Jesus. All we need to do is obey. In fact, much of it is common sense. God doesn’t have to tell us to brush our teeth. We just know we ought to do it. God doesn’t have to tell us to help a brother or sister in need. We just

know we ought to do it. That's the message of the book of James! If you know what you ought to do, do it!



Historically, the church has identified two types of sins. There are sins of **commission**, or those things we know we should *not* do but do anyway. There are also sins of **omission**, or those things we know we *should* do but don't. That's what James 4:17 is referring to when it says, "It is a sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it" (NLT). God shouldn't have to send us earth-shattering messages from heaven every time he wants to get our attention. But there are those times, like these moments for Joseph, when the stakes are so high that God chooses to speak clearly and forcefully.

What would have happened if Joseph had hesitated? What if he had determined that the dream was just a case of roasted lamb's leg gone bad? How did he know it was really God? For that matter, how do *we* know when it's God speaking to *us*?

I think that may be why we sometimes hesitate. We're not sure if God is really speaking or not. Now some folks wouldn't know God was speaking to them if he bit them on the nose. The more "spiritual" among us want to "test the spirits." We want to be sure that what we feel in our gut is also true in our heart. We don't want to be rash or impetuous, because our world of reason and logic often doesn't match our world of spiritual impressions, and we just want to be sure. As a result, in those moments when God does speak clearly, almost instantly the enemy of our soul casts the hazy counterwork of doubt and questioning:

"Did God really say that? Are you sure?"

"Why would he want you to do that? You'd make a fool out of yourself."

“What would other people think?”

“Would it honor God for you to look like an idiot?”

It can be difficult to know at times when it's God and when it's not, because it doesn't happen every day. And yet Joseph seemed to know. Somehow he knew the voice. He had made a commitment to a righteous life, and he was learning to hear and understand the prompts and checks of God.

What do you think was different for Joseph in these particular moments? Why did he know that his instant obedience was necessary? I have a hunch that it goes back to God's primary work in the world. Salvation history was being made, and God was calling Joseph to be a part of it. For most of us the critical nature of instant obedience always has something to do with crucial turning points in our lives and the lives of other people.

• • •

There are personal moments of instant obedience when not obeying endangers our souls. When we are called to say no to temptation and yes to God, to say no to pride and yes to humility, to say no to self-indulgence and yes to self-sacrifice, to say no to ourselves and yes to Jesus.

These are personal salvation-history moments.

But there are also salvation-history moments that God appoints for our lives to intersect the lives of others. I'm not talking about mindless obedience or blind faith. I'm referring to important matters of timing when God's Spirit is so closely at work in another person's life that we must do something in that window of time or risk losing it forever. These opportune times could be considered spiritual life-and-death moments—divine appointments in another's salvation history—of which God calls us to be

a part. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a prime example. God directed Philip with very precise orders that demanded instant obedience to achieve perfect timing. If Philip had hesitated, even for an hour, he would have missed his divine appointment. Instant obedience was crucial in the Ethiopian's salvation history.

Instant obedience has salvation-history implications. That was true for Joseph, and it is true for us. Salvation history is being made, and God calls us to be a part of it. When the stakes are that high and the issues are eternal, nothing short of instant obedience will do. It can mean the difference between spiritual life and death.



During my growing-up years in the church, my dad sat in the front of the sanctuary. I sat near the back with the other teens. One Sunday night a man I didn't recognize showed up at the evening service. As soon as he walked in, I knew he was out of place. Not only was he a stranger, but he also had long, greasy hair, wore a leather jacket, and had on jeans with holes in them before it was considered cool to dress that way. I could sense that he was uneasy and very uncomfortable. He was able to make it through the singing, the announcements, and the prayer time, but as soon as our pastor started his sermon, he leaped up from his seat and charged out the back door of the sanctuary. Everyone in the church could hear the door slam.

My father, sitting in the front, heard him go out the back. Without a moment's hesitation he went out a side door and followed the man into the parking lot. This was something I was not about to miss, and so I quietly slipped out as well. I stood in the shadows of the church building and watched as my father chased the

stranger down. The man turned abruptly toward my dad as if he were prepared to fight. But Dad's love disarmed him. He placed his hands on the man's shoulders and said, "Sir, my name is Bob. I'm so glad you came to our church tonight. Please don't leave. You are welcome here. In fact, if you would be willing, I'd like for you to come and sit with my wife and me. And then after the service we could go out for some pie and ice cream and get to know each other better. Would you come back inside?" I saw the stranger's face relax. Then he nodded his head, and he and my dad walked back into the church together.

The next Sunday, the man was back, and then the week after that. He became a part of our church. He had dinner at our house on several occasions. Eventually he became a wonderful Christian man, answered a call to ministry and pastored another church, and was a pallbearer at my father's funeral. I've often wondered where that man would be if my dad had not acted with instant obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in that moment. I can only guess what *might* have happened. I do know what *did* happen. Salvation history was being made, and my dad got to be a part of it.



Do you want to know what I think? Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured by obedience—not by talent or success or good intentions. Obedience is the final measurement.

Being righteous is never simply being pure and good in the abstract; real righteousness is always joining with God to do God's work in the world. Do you want to do something great for God? Do what he says!

Joseph never speaks in the New Testament. In every scene he simply acts. His speech is to do the will of God in prompt, simple obedience. Do you know what that's called?

Righteousness.



“Busic weaves a tale of fidelity and hope as he connects the storyline of everyday people with the grand narrative of faith. Readers will be challenged and encouraged as they recognize their own story in the narrative of God and his amazing people.”

—Stephen Green, DMin

W.N. King Chair of Theology at Southern Nazarene University

How can someone be perfectly imperfect? Isn't that a contradiction? The Bible is filled with stories of people with all kinds of flaws and imperfections. The astounding thing is what happens when God changes their lives.

*Perfectly Imperfect* is about people whose true-to-life stories are found in the New Testament. They are like us in many ways—confused, tempted, and often afraid, but then they meet Jesus, and their lives are wonderfully transformed.

Through the character sketches in this book, we learn how God works with us. We discover something about the way God transforms us from what we are into what we can be. In these sometimes tragic and broken lives, we get a glimpse of how God renews us and remakes us into people who are perfectly imperfect.

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