

# Daily Bible: The Gospels

## October, 2016

Primary source: *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* by Mark Allan Powell

### Opening Questions

*What do you already know about the Gospels?*

*Does it bother you that there are four that don't always line up on the facts?*

Why do we have four Gospels?

- To give a more complete picture of Jesus (each has different emphases).
- Having multiple attestations to events is more reliable.
- What one evangelist's perspective lacks, we may glean by comparing. Makes for richer interpretation.

Then why only four? What about all the other gospels that didn't make the cut?

- Criteria:
  - Authorship by an apostle, or someone close to Jesus or an apostle
  - Acceptance by the body of Christ at large (i.e. was already being used in Christian worship)
  - Book contains consistency of doctrine and orthodox teaching
  - The book bears evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit.
  - Contains a passion narrative.
- Other gospels serve as important historical documents that tell us about prominent thought and theology of the period, but are otherwise dismissed by historians.

**TWO-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS:** How the Gospels are related

- Mark was first, drawn on by Matthew and Luke
- Q is a theoretical source of sayings, used by Luke and Matthew
- Other theories exist, but this prevails, even though we have no evidence of a physical Q

Example: Matthew compared to Mark

- Carries over almost all of Mark, but edited
- Also uses Q and M material (gathered in Matt's own community) – mostly parables
- How does Matt use Mark's material differently?
  - Mt improves the Greek – much more refined
  - Organized differently (obsessively, even... more later!)
  - Corrects some factual errors
  - Makes it more relevant to Matt's community
  - Jesus' more human expressions are eliminated, i.e. emotions, lack of knowledge or ability
  - Jesus' disciples *get it* in Matthew.
  - Portrait of Jewish leaders gets worse

### MARK

- His is thought to be the earliest Gospel.
- Mark the man is some first century Christian who was not a direct follower of Jesus, but knew people who knew Jesus and who were present for important events.

- Audience/exact location is uncertain, but he wrote for a community of predominantly gentile Christians.
- Most likely written around the time of the Jewish war with Rome (AD 66-70) – right *before* the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. (The only Gospel written before this big event!)

#### Mark's purpose

- He wants to proclaim “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
- He wanted to put the story (mostly spread by oral tradition) in writing, because people who had been eyewitnesses to the life (and death and resurrection) of Jesus were dying, and he didn't want the tradition to be lost or forgotten. This provided something to be read in Christian worship.
- The way he shapes his writing is often pastoral and theological, not political, expressive of what he believes to be the mind of Christ.

#### **Some Themes/Characteristics of Mark's Gospel:**

##### Urgency

- Things happen very quickly, and the word “immediately” is used 42 times.
- Expects Jesus to return very soon, and readers are urged toward constant vigilance.
- “Markan sandwich” – one story with another. (See 5:21-43 – Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman). Causes us to consider two unrelated stories in light of each other. This also adds to the sense of urgency.

##### Jesus' deeds over words

- Material covering Jesus' teaching takes up proportionately much less space than Matt, Luke, or John. Hardly any parables.
- Strong sense of Jesus as a miracle worker.
- Long passion narrative
  - Despite speed and urgency of the rest of the Gospel, the last three chapters slow way down to give a day-by-day and hour-by-hour account of the last week of Jesus' life.
  - The passion story (Jesus' ultimate deed) takes up a huge chunk of the Gospel – some say the rest of the Gospel is an introduction for this one deed.

##### Mark's Jesus is very human (“Son of Man”)

- Mark takes more time than other Gospels to describe Jesus' feelings. Jesus gets tired and hungry, and feels pity, anger, wonder, compassion, indignation, and love. (See Mark 10:21 vs. Matt 19:21)
- Jesus doesn't know everything (13:32), and his power is sometimes limited (6:5). Still, he is a miracle worker, teaches with authority, and is identified as the Son of God.

##### Secrecy motif

- Teaches in parables as a sort of secret code. He frequently commands people not to say anything. He silences demons who identify him as the Son of God.
- All is revealed at the crucifixion, where a centurion observes, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” This late revelation of Christ as the Son of God accents the point that Christ cannot be understood apart from the cross.

##### Failure of disciples

- Jesus' disciples don't get it. They don't understand, they are unobservant, they do the opposite of what Jesus says...
- At the crucifixion, none of them follows through on their promises to stand by him, even to die for him.
- Despite their continuous failures, Jesus never seems to regret his choice – good news for us!

- At resurrection, story is left open-ended (did they tell anyone or not??), which leaves space for us to become those disciples.
- Discipleship and the cross: Mark frames discipleship from the cross, based on *Christ's* merits and clearly not our own (his disciples have none!). A grace-filled Gospel!

## **MATTHEW**

- Matthew is historically authoritative, the “Gospel of the Church,” which is why it is first in the Bible (even though Mark was most likely written first). It includes practical writings for disciples: church discipline, prayer, baptism, communion, promise of continuing presence, the special role of an apostle (Peter emphasis), and Jesus as Messiah.
- Writes for a Jewish audience – so you see a lot of, “This was to fulfill...” He draws on the sacred scriptures of his audience. Also regards Jewish leaders with more hostility.
  - Sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 15:24)
  - Canaanite woman calls him on this (15:22-28)
- Written between AD 80 and 90 (post Temple destruction).

### **Themes/Characteristics of Matthew's Gospel**

- *Organization* – Matthew is obsessive. The Gospel is organized as Five Books of Jesus (five major speeches or discourses), like the Five Books of Moses. Matthew even changes the order of things somewhat from Mark's description in order to fit it into his organization scheme.
- *Fulfillment* – Jesus IS the Davidic Messiah they have been waiting for. Frequent references to Jewish scripture confirms this fulfillment.
- *The Abiding Presence of God* – Matthew's Jesus is “Emmanuel,” God-with-us. People worship Jesus; this is approved. Emphasizes continuing presence after Easter – 28:20. The Church remains as the manifestation of Jesus in the world now.
- *Particular interest in the law* – Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He abides by some laws, but throws others out. In the end, we should follow Jesus' commands, because he hits all the most important laws.
- *People of little faith* – In Matthew, this isn't so bad, because a little faith can go a long way! But there is always room for growth, so Matthew also includes rules of order: for example, forgiveness, which becomes the hallmark of the community. This is gracious and pastoral: they are accepted as inadequate sinners, but their participation in the community will have an effect on them. Expectations are high, but there is also enough grace to make up the difference. Matthew insists on the certainty and necessity of forgiveness.

## **LUKE**

### **Luke Compared to Mark**

- Many of the same changes as Matthew – better Greek, takes out some of Jesus' more human traits, corrects errors, etc.
- Carries over just over half of Mark and has lots of Luke-specific material:
  - Prodigal Son, Good Samaritan, longer birth narrative, Magnificat and other canticles, Jesus' childhood, Mary and Martha, rich man and Lazarus, 10 Lepers, appearance on the road to Emmaus... and many more!

### **Audience and Context**

- Identifies audience: includes prologue “To Theophilus” (God-lover). Broader audience was primarily Gentiles.

- Luke is an historian. He gives us context and often more detail than other Gospels (his Gospel is the longest).
- Tradition says Luke was a physician, which he may have been. But he writes intelligently about many different areas, so he could have been in any number of roles!
- Also wrote Acts, the first history of the Church.

### **Themes/Characteristics of Luke:**

#### Emphasis on worship and prayer

- Gospel begins and ends with scenes of worship (Zechariah, and post ascension)
- Much of our liturgical material comes from Luke
  - Magnificat (1:46-55) in Evening Prayer (LBW p. 147); Song of Zechariah (1:68-79) in Morning Prayer (p. 134); Song of Simeon (2:29-32) as post-communion hymn (p. 93).
- Jesus prays more often in this Gospel than any others – anytime anything of significance is happening (Baptism, Transfiguration, etc.), and he offers more instruction on prayer, including some parables on prayer (Widow and Unjust Judge, 18:1-8).

#### Interest in food

- Jesus is often eating – 19 meals (14 are unique to Luke), and several stories about banquets
- Food is possibly a metaphor for life – “God fills the hungry with good things” – and sharing food is sharing life. (Like John’s “Bread of life” metaphor)

#### Lifts up the poor – Jesus’ ministry is to those who are oppressed, excluded, or otherwise at a disadvantage in society

- “Bring good news to the poor” – Jesus’ first public sermon (Luke 4:14-21)
- Other texts: Magnificat, Good Samaritan, sermon on the plain (6:20ff), Lazarus and rich man (16:19-31)

#### Women predominance

- Mary and Elizabeth, right off the bat, and several others play starring roles.

#### Emphasis on the Spirit

- Jesus is conceived by the Spirit, anointed, inspired by, empowered by, etc.
- Prepares us for Part II (Acts), in which the Holy Spirit is a main character.

#### Major Themes in Luke

- Models for Understanding Jesus – Luke is writing for a culturally diverse audience, and so draws from many different cultural resources to frame the identity of Jesus
  - Messiah – OT shows that God will raise up a Messiah, so Luke shows Jesus fulfilling those prophecies
  - Son of Man (Daniel)
  - Mosaic prophet (Deuteronomy) – Luke shows Jesus’ life as recalling Moses’ life
  - Suffering Servant (Isaiah) – through whom God will establish justice.
  - Elijah (Malachi) – Elijah must return before the day of the Lord. Luke presents Jesus as the one who ultimately fulfills the hopes associated with the return of Elijah.
  - Also draws on many models from Greco-Roman world (reflecting gentile audience)
    - Philosopher – teaches his disciples a new way of living, calling them to become like their teacher (6:40)
    - Immortal – like Greek mythology
    - Benefactor – forgiveness of sins, bestowal of peace, endurance of trials – Jesus’ coming is good news for all the earth!

→ *Why?* Perhaps trying to assert claims of Christianity against pagan beliefs. Or, perhaps seeking common ground, portraying Jesus in words people would understand (and hopefully buy into!). See 1 Cor 9:19-23.

Even today, we get different images of Jesus from different cultures. This provides a complex glimpse of who Jesus is, giving readers/believers something that is familiar to them in order to understand. (Like a sermon illustration!)

- Disciples: In Luke, they GET IT!
  - Disciples are over-confident!
  - In Acts, they become almost replicas of Jesus, doing all the same things he did.
  - God can accomplish much through the lives of ordinary people. The possibility of God's will being accomplished in people's lives and in the world is greater than they imagine!
- Salvation Happens Now
  - Only synoptic Gospel in which Jesus is called "Savior."
  - Luke never links salvation definitely to Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus saves people throughout his life on earth. For Luke, salvation and life are possible here and now!
  - Salvation in Luke means *liberation*.
    - Liberation from whatever happens to bind you, from whatever it is that prevents their lives from being as God wishes their lives to be. (19:1-10)
  - How can people experience salvation in a world where Jesus is no longer present?
    - Jesus is not absent; from the right hand of God, he continues to bring salvation to the people through the Spirit (of Jesus)
    - Pentecost; also preaching is "the message of salvation"

## JOHN – the Odd Guy Out

John is significantly different from the other three Gospels – 90% unparalleled in Mt, Mk, and Lk  
Did John know the Synoptics?

- Perhaps no – so much material is different.
- Perhaps yes – he didn't want to overlap these accounts, but rather put forth a different view of Jesus, more focused on essence than fact.

The character of John is very wrapped up in the community he was writing for:

- Anti-Temple Jews – from larger Jewish community, but their claim that Jesus was God caused issue. Not monotheistic. Hence their rejection from the Temple.
- John's reference to "the Jews" refers to the synagogue authorities at the time
- While the community is sometimes considered sectarian, their beliefs have come to be considered orthodoxy.

## Characteristics of John

### Hymnic prologue

- Describes Jesus as the Word made flesh
- Genealogy traces lineage back to God (not just Abraham or Moses or Adam). The Son has been present from the very beginning (co-creator with the Father – see Nicene Creed).
- Provides basis for the *incarnation* (God becoming flesh)
- Emphasizes both the complete divinity of Jesus, and the complete humanity
  - The basis for our most important Christology (two natures of Christ)

“The disciple whom Jesus loved”

- A mysterious person – not exactly sure who it is. Could be imaginary character with whom all readers can identify, could be John the son of Zebedee, could be Lazarus...

Abundant use of symbolism/misunderstanding

- “Lamb of God,” “I am” sayings, allusions to sacramental elements... This contributes to frequent misunderstanding... and hence the realization of multiple levels of meaning.

Dualism

- Light/dark, spirit/flesh, insider/outsider
- Followers are called to live in the world but not of it (17:15-16). In this way, they are a living testimony for God’s will for humankind. They are *evangelists*.

Jesus’ teaching style is different

- No parables. Instead, delivers long, philosophical discourses on abstract notions like “truth” and “freedom.” Jesus talks mostly about himself.

Emphasis on Spirit

- As “Paraclete” (Advocate, Comforter). Jesus’ leaving allows him to send the Spirit to them.
- In Luke, Spirit empowers mission and ministry; in John, Spirit reveals and teaches truth.

Jesus’ miracles are “signs”

- Reflects that John is an evangelist – *showing* people why they should believe in Jesus.
- Signs lead people to true faith.
- Still, a special blessing for those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (doubting Thomas)

Crucifixion = exaltation

- Does not refer to later suffering, as other Gospels do, but says 3x he will be “lifted up”
- Though he does suffer, Jesus appears to remain in control of the situation – he is laying down his life by his own will.
- He doesn’t cry out on the cross, he says, “It is finished.” His work is completed; he is glorified.

Opponents are “the Jews”

- While “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22), John depicts Jews as people who do not believe in their own Scriptures.
- Not all the Jews are bad (Jesus and disciples were Jews) – mostly referring to leaders.
- “Judeans” has been used to downplay anti-Semitic sentiments.
- Defines Judaism and Christianity as two different religious movements.

Emphasis on LOVE as the new commandment and distinctive mark of followers

- We don’t get the Golden Rule (love your neighbor, love your enemies). Instead, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”
- Also, no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend (15:13), which Jesus does
  - Underscores that Jesus shows us how we should be, shows us the way to the Father.
  - God’s love is clearly shown to us on the cross.
- Jesus also reveals that God loves the world and desires to bless and save, rather than punish or condemn.

**Discussion:**

- *Are all of these portrayals of Jesus the “real” Jesus? How?*
- *Which portrayal of Jesus do you most identify with?*
- *Which Gospel do you gravitate toward and why?*