

The Four Gospel Accounts

PART 1: MATTHEW

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This morning I would invite you to turn with me to four books at the same time! Today's lesson is somewhat unusual in that we will be looking together at four books - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We don't have a single passage, so we'll be doing more of an overview over the next several weeks, looking at many passages, and the reason is: One of our members has turned in an interesting request. She is asking for "a sermon comparing and contrasting the four gospel [accounts]; studying the differences and why they are important." We have looked at this a time or two through the years as we have studied the gospel accounts in our Wednesday evening class, but as far as I can tell, we've never covered this in sermon form, and we've certainly never covered it in the way we plan on studying it this morning.

As we begin, I'd like to give the big picture, as we have before. The Bible is a book, and yet it is more than a book. It is actually a library of books - 39 in what we usually refer to as the Old Testament, covering from the creation up until (very roughly) several hundred years before the coming of Jesus. These are divided up into the five books of Law, twelve books of History, five books of Poetry, and then the prophets. Then we have the 27 books of the New Testament, starting with the four that we will start looking at today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four books describe the arrival and birth of Jesus and continue on through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension back into heaven. Acts picks up where these four leave off, and Acts describes the establishment and growth of the early church. We then have a series of letters - 13 by the apostle Paul (starting with his letters to several churches, continuing with letters to several friends), we then have eight letters by several authors, and the Bible closes with Revelation, a book of prophecy.

But as we look back at Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, I want to point out something of a teachable moment here. As much as I love this graphic (we have it on a classroom wall downstairs), it does get something wrong (or at least not quite right), and the one small issue I have with it is how it labels these books. You might notice on the little label down there that it refers to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the "gospels." And it may or may not be a big deal, but in the Bible, the word "*gospel*" is always singular, never plural. There is only one gospel. The word gospel literally refers to the "*good news*." So, there is only one gospel. In Galatians 1, in fact, Paul even warns very specifically against those who would bring "*another gospel*." I might compare it to the word "*teaching*" in the Bible. Good teaching or sound doctrine is always singular, but there are many "*false teachings*" or "*false doctrines*." So, in the same way, we have one gospel. There is one unified message

concerning Jesus coming into this world, but we do have four accounts of it. And that is why I am referring to the “Four Gospel Accounts” up here.

With this being said, we need to at least consider the question: Why four? Why do we have four different accounts of the same events as opposed to having one official document? Well, to answer this question, it might help to remember that even as we think about famous people today, sometimes we really appreciate having different perspectives. Sometimes we appreciate having different points of view. We think of the death of President Bush this week. Most of us have appreciated hearing different accounts of his life - from various members of the family, from the press, from those who worked with him at the White House, and from those who knew him later in life. In a sense, that is what we have with the four gospel accounts. We have four perspectives of the life of Jesus. We might also compare it to how we get our news today. How many of us only get our news from only one source? Most of us get our news from various places, and often we might even read many sources concerning the same event, and we do this to get a more complete picture and a more complete understanding of what has happened.

We think about what happened this past Friday morning up in Alaska. I think my first notification came on Facebook, and then I went to Drudge, and then Fox News, and then reports started coming in from friends and family up there - pictures, and video, and eyewitness accounts. And within just a few hours, most of us were starting to get a very clear picture of what happened up there. We saw it from different perspectives. The accounts we read were accurate for the most part, but they were different. Different people mentioned different experiences - some people were in school, some were at work, some were at home, and some were driving - and they all had a different experience. And that is somewhat similar to what we find when we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - we have the life of Jesus, the good news, explained from four points of view. And we thank God for the diversity. We thank God for these unique perspectives that give us a deeper insight into who Jesus really is.

As we get started, I know I’ve mentioned this many times before, but if you do not have this book at home already, I would highly recommend it, *A Harmony of the Gospels (NASB)*, by Thomas and Gundry. And I know, “gospels” is plural here. Nobody is perfect! But whenever we study the gospel accounts together in any way, I always want to suggest this as a tool. And the reason is, it lays out the four gospel accounts in a parallel way. If all four accounts cover the same event, it’s spread over four columns. If it’s only in three, there are three columns, and so on, and it makes it very easy to compare. I’ve put a reference at the bottom of the handout. It is a valuable resource, and it is available on Amazon for just over \$20. If you order it right now, you might even be able to pick it up on the UW campus tomorrow. It would be hard for me to overemphasize what an amazing and helpful resource this is. If we didn’t have any apps or computer software, and if I could only have a limited number of books, I would choose the Bible itself in a good English translation like the NASB or the ESV, second on that list would be a concordance to match that translation, number three on this list would be a Harmony of the Gospels, and then a good Bible dictionary, followed by an atlas. If I could only have five books for the rest of my life, those are my top five - the Bible, a concordance, this Harmony, a Bible dictionary, and an atlas. Christmas is coming, so if you know somebody who doesn’t have this book, you still have time.

As we get into our study, I’m hoping that all of you have a handout by now. My goal is to do this as something of an overview and to give us some tools as we study and try to understand the four gospel accounts on our own. So, if you do this kind of thing, I hope you can fill in the grid with some of the basic information and references, and then as we read through the gospel accounts (perhaps at the beginning of the new year in a few weeks), we’ll have some information to be looking for as we read. As you can see, I’ve put a reading plan on the back as something of a guide. We’ve used this before. Feel free to use it again. Either start right now, or

save it until we are done with this series, and maybe use it to start the new year - choose an accountability partner, read together with your family - whatever is most helpful to you. Concerning the chart, on the wall, I'll just put up a word or two by way of summary, but I hope you can fit in whatever you feel is important.

This morning, then, we start with MATTHEW, we'll zoom in on the chart here, noting that Matthew is the author, and in Matthew 10:3, Matthew is listed with the apostles and he is described as **"the tax collector."** On the handout, then, you might want to write in, "Matthew, tax collector and apostle," with "Matthew 10:3" as a reference. By the way, Matthew is the only one who tells us about the parable of the man who went out and found the treasure in a field (in Matthew 13:44-46), the man who went out and then sold all that he had to purchase the field, and the same goes for the man who finds the pearl of great price. First of all, Matthew had done this himself. Matthew left his lucrative career to follow Jesus. But also, I find it interesting that that story has some tax implications, doesn't it! As Jesus is speaking and describing this man selling everything to buy a field or a pearl, Matthew is probably running the numbers in his head. He's probably thinking, "That's an interesting scenario. How should we tax that?" Nevertheless, Matthew, as a tax collector, is the only one who records these particular parables.

As we continue thinking about Matthew as the author of this book, we should note that in Mark 2 and Luke 5, Matthew is referred to as **"Levi,"** his Jewish name. All of the apostles but one, I believe, had both Greek and Jewish names. So, he is **"Matthew"** with his Greek friends and **"Levi"** with his Jewish friends. Mark and Luke also explain that Jesus calls Matthew as he is sitting in his **"tax booth"** (Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27). We think of the toll booths they have down in Illinois. I've said before that I am looking forward to meeting Matthew someday and explaining that the State of Illinois has figured out how to take money out of your wallet as you are sitting on it and as you are traveling 70 MPH. I think Matthew would absolutely be impressed with the i-PASS system! Well, back in Roman times, the Romans knew they needed a certain amount of taxes from the people they conquered, but they didn't want to be bothered by the details, so they would often bid that out. They might say, "We need this amount of money collected on this particular road, who wants this position?" The locals would bid for that position, and the highest bidder got the tax booth. It was up to them to then collect what Rome wanted collected, and they had the support of the Roman military to make it happen. Rome then allowed them to collect more than the minimum for their own personal support. And as you can imagine, the system was often abused. Tax collectors, in addition to being seen as betraying their own people by working for the invading and occupying force, were also seen as being somewhat abusive and somewhat dishonest, as they collected basically whatever they thought they could get away with. Today, many of us are not thrilled with the IRS or the City Assessor. We know they are just doing what they need to do, and yet many of us still have some level of resentment when it comes to paying our taxes. The tax man pretty much can't make anybody happy. In Janesville, the father of one of the members down there was the city assessor, and it was a stressful position, as you can imagine. Nobody ever calls the assessor to complain about not paying enough taxes. Instead, the tax man always seems to be the bearer of bad news. And the same is true today. Whenever we get something from the city assessor's office, the bill always seems to be higher than it was last year. We get an envelope that has "Madison City Assessor" in the return address, it's an "Oh, no," moment. We appreciate the services we receive, we seem to get a decent return for what we pay, we love having our street plowed, but nobody enjoys paying taxes. Multiply that irritation by a thousand, and we might have some idea of Matthew's role in First Century Jerusalem. Most people hated this man! And yet Jesus calls Matthew as an apostle. It's also interesting to me that as he is called by Jesus, in Luke 5:29 Matthew decides to throw a party for all of his tax collector friends. Some of you might remember that years ago I preached on that party Matthew hosted for his friends, and at that time we were posting video of our sermons, and as we looked at the stats on the website some time later, we found that somebody found our site by searching for the phrase, "Matthew's Party Video." My sermon was probably not the "Matthew's Party Video" they were

looking for, but Matthew did throw a party for his tax-collecting friends. And this, of course, makes some of the religious leaders pretty angry, but Matthew really wants his friends to meet Jesus. And this desire to tell people about Jesus continues, because thirty years later, Matthew writes the book of Matthew. Many scholars believe, then, that Matthew writes his book at some point in the 60's AD.

As to the original audience, it seems that Matthew is writing this book primarily to his fellow Jews. Many scholars, in fact, believe that Matthew originally wrote his book not in Greek, but in Hebrew, and that it was very quickly translated into Greek. But it was aimed primarily at a Jewish audience, most likely written as a teaching tool to be used as outreach by the church in Jerusalem. As we might say today, it was intended to be something of a Bible class book. It was a tool for reaching out to the Jewish community. Because of this, all throughout the book of Matthew, we see Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, and this would have been extremely important to a Jewish audience. We also see an emphasis on the genealogy in Matthew. If you're in Matthew already, notice how the book starts (in Matthew 1:1), ***"The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."*** For most of us, that seems like a rather strange way to start a book. But most of us are Gentiles. Generally speaking, we don't care who our great-great-great-great-grandparents were. But back then, the Jewish people did care about that. Their entire religious life revolved around who their ancestors were and what tribe they were from. There were prophecies and promises made to certain tribes, so genealogies were important. Matthew, then, writing to Jews, starts out with a genealogy, and he does that to prove to his Jewish readers right at the very beginning that Jesus is qualified to be their king. He is a descendant of David. And this is a bold claim. He starts his book by claiming what he has not yet proven, ***"Jesus [is] the Messiah, the son of David,"*** and then he sets out to prove it. Some have suggested that Matthew's gospel account was written by a Jew, about a Jew, to the Jews. And I think we see this proven true as we read through the book. So, in the "audience" blank, you might want to write, "JEWS."

With this in mind, we note next on the chart that Jesus is portrayed in Matthew as a ***KING***, as the ***MESSIAH***. ***"Messiah,"*** of course, refers to someone as being ***"God's anointed,"*** going back to the practice of pouring oil over the head as a new king was being publicly acknowledged as God's choice. So in Matthew, Jesus is the ***KING***, the Jewish ***MESSIAH***.

As to prominent ideas in Matthew, we see an emphasis on the Law. We have more than 40 direct quotes from the Old Testament, and most of these are brought over and quoted in order to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy. For example, in Matthew 1:22, Matthew explains the conception and birth of Jesus and then says, ***"Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet...."*** He then gives us (in verse 23) a direct quote from the book of Isaiah. And we see this over and over again in Matthew, "This happened to fulfill what was written," and then a direct quote from one of the prophets. In Chapter 2, when King Herod ordered the murder of the children, Matthew explains (in verse 17), ***"Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled...."*** He then quotes a passage from Jeremiah. In Chapter 3, as John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus, Matthew explains (in verse 3), ***"For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet....,"*** and then he quotes Isaiah 40:3. In Chapter 4, Matthew explains how Jesus leaves Nazareth, moves to Capernaum, and starts his ministry by preaching in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. In verse 14, Matthew says that, ***"This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet...."*** And then he quotes from Isaiah. We see this throughout the book, an emphasis on Jesus being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. We see it especially in the last few chapters with Jesus' death - over and over again, his death fulfills prophecy - from the betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, to the casting of lots for his garments, and even the words he spoke from the cross - all of these things were predicted, and Matthew gives us the actual citations. We don't see this in the gospel accounts that were aimed at Gentiles, but we see it in

Matthew, because his audience was interested in this. They needed to know. They needed this information so that they could come to an informed decision as to whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

As to the arrangement of the book, Matthew is structured around five major sermons:

- The Sermon on the Mount (5-7)
- The Instructions to the Apostles (10)
- The Kingdom Parables (13)
- Jesus' Teaching on Humility and Forgiveness (18)
- Jesus' Sermon in Jerusalem and on the Mount of Olives (23-25)

And these five sermons are somewhat parallel, giving structure to the book, because in each case, Matthew wraps up each section by saying something like, "***When Jesus had finished these words,***" he did this or that, or whatever. So, there was a time of speaking, he finished speaking, "***he finished these words,***" and then he moved along and did something else. If you are interested, these "markers" are found in Matthew 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1.

As to key words and phrases, in addition to the idea of the prophecies being "***fulfilled***" (as we noted earlier), we also have at least 57 references to "***the kingdom of heaven***" or the "***kingdom of God.***" As you remember, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the Messiah, God's King, and so we have an emphasis on the "***kingdom of heaven***" or the "***kingdom of God.***" Twelve of the thirteen parables in Matthew begin with the words, "***The kingdom of heaven is like,***" and then he gives a comparison or a description. In addition to this, the word "***king***" is used at least ten other times in the book. And then, connected to this idea of Jesus being a King, we also have several references to Jesus' "***authority.***" At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew refers to how the crowds were amazed, because Jesus taught as someone who had "***authority,***" not as one of their scribes. And then at the very end of the book, we have Jesus saying in 28:18, "***All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.***"

The word "***follower***" is found 24 times in Matthew, and the related word "***disciple***" or "***student***" is found 76 times. Forty-seven times Matthew tells us that Jesus had "***multitudes***" following him. Matthew also tells us how many were miraculously fed - at least 5,000 men in Matthew 14:21 and at least 4,000 men in Matthew 15:38. It just seems like an interesting emphasis, as if (30 years later) Matthew was telling his readers in Jerusalem that if they wanted to check out his story, there were plenty of witnesses. Jesus did not preach in secret, but he had many followers right there in the city of Jerusalem.

As we come near the end of today's study, I would point out in this "interesting facts" category that Matthew's account is very precise, almost as if it was written by an accountant. There are no wasted words. We'll get to this next week hopefully, but Mark almost rambles. Mark is basically one long run-on sentence. Mark almost sounds like a 4-year old telling you what he did with his grandparents over Thanksgiving. He's excited and rambling. Matthew, though, is concise. Matthew is longer than Mark in terms of the number of words, but every word seems to be precise and very carefully chosen.

Conclusion:

We've come to the end for today, but hopefully we can get back into it next week by doing an overview of Mark. Feel free to read Matthew and Mark before next week. In Matthew, be looking out for some of these things, and in Mark, try to anticipate some of what might go in the chart here.

In terms of what we do with what we've learned this morning, the gospel is the good news. This book is an eyewitness account of the good news. This book is written by a man who knew Jesus, by a man who knew Jesus personally for 3-½ years. We obey the good news when we believe Matthew's testimony that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God (as Matthew records Peter saying in Matthew 16:16). There again, we have an emphasis on Jesus being the Messiah - a statement that is only found in Matthew. When we believe this, it changes us - we turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. We obey the command at the very end of Matthew, as Jesus told his disciples to, ***"Go...and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."*** If we are already disciples, this is a message we have to be communicating to others; otherwise, we are not obeying the King here. But if you are not yet a disciple, this invitation is open for you. We have a baptistery downstairs - we can all go down there together, or it can be just a few of us - it takes about half an hour to fill, so in less than an hour you can do what the King has asked us to do to be added to his kingdom. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to accept this invitation right now, you can come talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Author				
Date				
Audience				
Jesus				
Big Ideas				
Arrangement				
Key Words				
Interesting Facts				

Highly Recommended: *A Harmony of the Gospels (NASB)*, by Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry

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