

THE GOSPELS: Witnessing Jesus and His Teaching ...

The Gospels are unique documents. They contain both stories about Jesus and teachings of Jesus. They are eyewitness accounts rather than biographies. Jesus did not pen a gospel, if he had, it would have been in Aramaic and probably similar to the Prophets. The four Gospels were written in Greek and present his ministry and translate his sayings within narrative contexts. The writers selected their material for different Christian communities with different needs such as Rome or Ephesus or Antioch, presenting stories set in a rural Jewish setting to a urban pagan environment.

The Gospels reveal Jesus as one who taught with authority (Mk 1:22f, Mt 7:24, Mk 4:32) and not like the Scribes and Rabbis. He starkly contrasted his words with theirs and claimed divine authority for His own, not citing authorities to support His words. (Jn 7:15,16, 8:28) Jesus' teaching attracted great crowds of people, not just scholars to debate Him, but ordinary common people. They thronged around Him, sought Him out, followed Him even into the wilderness. It was not just the "signs and wonders" that attracted them, it was also the nature and content of his teaching. He spoke "wisdom"- not just theoretical truths, but the truths that lead to godliness, a godliness reflected in His own goodness - for in Jesus the truths of God found a living demonstration.

Jesus was a master teacher. Even his opponents grudgingly had to admit this and addressed him as such. He spoke clearly and directly with a profound simplicity. His words were full of down-to-earth illustrations from everyday life that held the interest of the listener even as they revealed spiritual truth. The speculations, sophistication, wordiness, theorizing and casuistry of the Scribes and Pharisees was replaced by clear concrete simple truth.

Jesus' teaching can be said to be radical. He made an extravagant use of language - which served to hold interest and impress his points. He used many figures of speech: Overstatement and understatement, metaphor, paradox, dilemma, hyperbole, etc. There are numerous examples in the Sermon on the Mount alone. Care must be taken to recognize and properly interpret these figures of speech - many have made serious errors by overlooking these. Jesus also frequently used parables. Even his miracles served as means of teaching.

"But the term radical has a special bearing on the content . . . Jesus made no attempt to adjust his ethical demands to the limitations of human nature. The loftiness of the standard was not allowed to soften the edge of requirement."
Everett Harrison, A Short Life of Christ, p 98.

Because of the similarity between the recorded teaching of Jesus and the wisdom literature of the O.T. and the clear relationship between James and the Lord's teaching, the principles for studying Proverbs should be kept clearly in mind. At the same time, however, the N.T. material carries an authority and application that may not be extended to the Proverbs to the same degree.

It is widely recognized that there is a poetic structure discernible in many of our Lord's words. This served as an aid to memory for the listener. These words especially fixed themselves in the hearts (and notes) of the disciples who later recalled these words and recorded them in the Gospels. The "proverbial" form is there. Many of Jesus sayings are stated in contrasts and antithetic or synonymous parallel expressions. One good example among many is Matt 7:7. Repetition is seen in Matt 5:3-11.

Jesus' teaching was usually both spontaneous and occasional. His words are often related closely to the events and culture in which they had their origin. Jesus' remark about the camel and the eye of a needle came in the context of a rich man who couldn't give his riches to the poor and needy. Any absolutizing or abstracting Jesus' words from their setting may obscure the Lord's very teaching. In studying the Gospels, you should pay close attention to the historical context (Jerusalem and Palestine in the days of Jesus) as well as the particular audiences addressed by each gospel.

The fact that **there are four Gospels** is significant for us. They stand side by side, each bearing a unique and inspired witness to the Lord Jesus Christ

Matthew was written to portray Jesus Christ as the King of the Jews and show Him as the fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew tends to group his discourse material topically.

Mark was written to portray Jesus as a Servant and was intended to enable Gentile believers to better understand the ministry of Jesus . It is the most straight-forward narrative and was probably the first Gospel written. Mark was an associate of both Paul and Peter and reflects their testimony.

Luke was written to portray Jesus' humanity and to strengthen the faith of a Gentle believer. Luke, a close associate of Paul, undertook to carefully research his material and includes much eyewitness material probably gathered while Paul was imprisoned in Palestine. He likely interviewed Mary, for example. Luke chapters 10 through 19 has no parallel in the other Gospels. Acts continues this account. The **Acts of the Apostles** continues this account - focusing on Jesus at work through His Spirit at work in the Church.

John was written to portray Jesus as the Son of God and stresses His deity. John wrote near the end of his own life, and both gives us the framework to understand the Chronology of the other gospels (by recording Jesus attendance at the Jewish feasts), and in particular stresses the teaching of Jesus' discourses. It describes how Jesus revealed Himself to the World and to His disciples.

Jesus' teachings are recorded in parallel accounts and these must be taken into consideration. The first three gospels are called "synoptic" because they are roughly parallel accounts. That there are differences in those accounts is obvious, but note the similarities of the synoptics as well: ". . . often the similarities extend to precise word order, and it is highly unlikely that three people in three different parts of the Roman Empire would tell the same story with the same words - even to such minor points of individual style as prepositions and conjunctions. Yet this is what happens over and over again in the first three gospels." Fee and Stuart, How to Read The Bible for All Its Worth, p. 122.

The principles of selection, arrangement and adaptation may explain many of the so-call discrepancies among the Gospels. As divinely inspired authors, they selected those narratives and teachings that suited their purposes; they arranged the material selected with the special interests of their churches in mind, and in adapting an account may focus on the particular aspects related to their concerns.

It appears that Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources, as well as other source materials, some of which they have in common. These parallels should be sought out and carefully considered. One writer may have abbreviated what another gives more fully. Since these accounts are based on notes and material selectively assembled and because Jesus probably repeated his teaching in different settings, we should not be upset or concerned, if there is variation in words used or in that which is included or omitted or placed in a different arrangement. Compare Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount* and Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*, for example.

The Gospels do not claim to be an exhaustive record of Jesus' teaching. (Jn 21:25), nor do they claim to give every word spoken on a particular day. It is the testimony of the gospel, not the teaching of Jesus that is given to us as Inspired Scripture. Any effort to try and isolate Jesus' teaching and set it on a higher plane than the rest of the Gospels is misguided. Because all the words inscripturated are part of inspired Scripture, they still have weight and force for us.

A important theological concern is at the heart of Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God which takes the form of the New Testament Eschatological viewpoint of "This age (which is passing away) the age to come (which has begun, but is not yet consummated)".

There is much fruitful study in the Gospels. Much time can be devoted to his sermons, especially the discourses of John's Gospel. The parables will be discussed later. The miracles are illustrations of the power of God in Jesus' ministry and many illustrate principles of the Kingdom, or of faith, or of its lacking. Besides giving us accounts of Jesus and His life and teaching, we also have here accounts of His ministry - which is a model for us of evangelism and discipling. We also have the stories of the disciples and others as they interact with the Lord and his teaching.

A Brief Gospels Bibliography:

Edersheim's The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah is a tremendous study, putting Jesus teaching and ministry into the cultural contexts of its day. Everett Harrison's A Short Life of Christ is also useful in understanding these. Joachim Jeremias' Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus is also quite helpful.

Calvin's Commentary on the Matthew, Mark and Luke, and Hendricksen's commentaries on each of the Gospels are very helpful, especially in comparing the Synoptic Accounts. A good harmony such as Synopsis of the Four Gospels by Kurt Aland is very helpful putting the texts in parallel columns.

Robert H. Stein's The Method and Message of Jesus Teaching is recommended. F. F. Bruce's Hard Sayings of Jesus is helpful for those difficult sayings.

The Training of the Twelve by A. B. Bruce is an excellent study of Jesus' discipling methods, and Robert Coleman's The Master Plan of Evangelism should be in every library.

R. C. Trench's Notes of on the Miracles of our Lord and Notes on the Parables of Our Lord are very helpful studies.

B. B. Warfield's The Person and Work of Christ has some excellent theological essays on the doctrines of the messiah and His work.

The Epistle of **James** should be mentioned. It was probably the first N.T. book written. Even a casual reading reveals its similarity to the book of Proverbs. Each verse carries a "poetic" quality and seems a verse unto itself - however, the verses are tightly woven and carry a powerful message of repentance and faith in Christ, one that manifests itself in life. It is easy to see it as being written by one who grew up with Jesus. Jesus' words are echoed in it. *"This epistle contains more verbal reminiscences of the teaching of Jesus than all the other apostolic writings taken together. Specially noteworthy are its undoubted echoes of the Sermon on the Mount."* Alexander Ross, NIV Commentary on James and John, p.16.