

Unit 1 Introduction

An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

The gospel of Matthew is perhaps the most significant Christian book ever written. It appears first in the order of the four gospels. And it has been called “the Church’s Gospel,” because most Christians are more familiar with it than with the other gospels. For example, when Christians think of the “Beatitudes” they typically recall the passage from Matthew rather than Luke. And when they recite the Lord’s Prayer it is Matthew’s version they use.

Nature and Purpose of the Gospels

The fact that we give the label “gospel” to the first four books of the New Testament suggests that their primary purpose is to preach or proclaim Jesus Christ. Thus, our gospels are not biographies of Jesus, in the usual modern sense of the term. Even the casual reader notes that much of what we would expect to find in a modern biography is missing from the pages of our gospels. For example, very little attention is given to the early life of Jesus; Luke alone mentions anything about Jesus’ adolescence, and then only a single event when Jesus was 12. And we look in vain for indications of the various cultural influences on Jesus or Jesus’ psychological development. Even many of the details of Jesus’ ministry are absent from the pages of our gospels.

While these omissions may seem strange to modern readers, those who lived in ancient times were accustomed to biographies that were highly selective in what they included and were focused upon presenting the person from a specific perspective and for particular purposes. Thus, most recent scholars have concluded that our gospels are “ancient biographies.” Each of our gospels, then, presents Jesus from a particular angle; each gospel includes information regarding Jesus’ life and teaching that fulfills the purpose of the gospel writer; and each gospel presents that information in a form that will effectively teach or preach to those Christians for whom the gospel was written. Each gospel writer was highly selective in what he chose to include and careful to structure his gospel in a way that would fulfill his purpose.

The fact that each of our gospel writers composed his gospel from a particular perspective and with specific purposes for Christian proclamation or instruction explains the differences among our gospels. In other words, each has its own message to communicate. This consideration points to the importance of studying each gospel on its own terms. From the beginning, the church has insisted that we should read the Gospels in such a way as to allow the distinctive message of each gospel to be heard on its own terms. Thus, when the second-century church father from Syria, Tatian, collapsed all

four gospels together into one continuous narrative (*The Diatesseron*) the church refused to allow that work to replace or even to stand alongside the Gospels. The church believed that Jesus Christ cannot be fully known nor understood through any one book. On the contrary, the church has insisted that it requires four books, each with its own message and emphases, to present Jesus in a way that is fully adequate for the life and nurturing of Christians.

Since each gospel writer, including Matthew, communicated his message through the way in which he has arranged the material in his book, we may grasp the message of Matthew’s gospel by noting how Matthew has constructed, or put together, his material to form his presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Flow of Matthew’s Gospel

The gospel of Matthew is primarily a story about Jesus. Although it contains five large blocks of teaching, each ending with the statement “when Jesus had finished saying these things” or the like (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), these are embedded within the narrative and are thus part of the story of Jesus’ ministry.

When we look for the major “turning points” in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus we are struck by the parallel statements at 4:17 and 16:21. We note that 4:17 reads: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” And 16:21 says: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Matthew uses these repeated statements to divide his gospel. Thus, we might label 1:1—4:16 “The Preparation of Jesus Messiah, Son of God”; we might call 4:17—16:20 “The Proclamation of Jesus Messiah, Son of God, to Israel”; and we might label 16:21—28:20 “The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Messiah, Son of God.”

Jesus’ Interactions with Others in Matthew’s Gospel

We note that Matthew repeatedly draws a comparison between Jesus and the expectations for the disciples. Thus, Matthew emphasizes the similarity between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the disciples. Both Jesus and the disciples have authority to cast out demons (8:16, 28-35; 9:32-34; 10:1, 8; 12:22-29; 15:21-28; 17:4-20); both Jesus and the disciples preach that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17; 10:7); and both Jesus and the disciples are (or will be) persecuted for their ministry (5:10-11; 10:16-38; 12:1-14, 24-42; 23:29-36; 26:1—27:66). Although some aspects of the ministry of

Jesus are not shared by the disciples (such as the forgiving of sins), Jesus is largely the model for ministry in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew also emphasizes the similarity between the behavior of Jesus and Jesus' demands for the disciples. Thus, Jesus' attitude of meekness or lowliness (5:5; 11:29; 18:3-4; 21:5; 23:12), servanthood (20:26-28; 25:14-26), mercy (5:7; 9:13, 27, 36; 12:7; 14:14; 15:22-32; 17:15; 18:33; 20:30-34; 23:23), and faithfulness in the midst of persecutions (24:42; 25:13; 26:38-41) is to be shared by the disciples. Indeed, even as Jesus made disciples of the Twelve throughout the gospel, so at the end of the gospel the disciples are commanded to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19). Therefore, Jesus is the model for discipleship in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew presents the Twelve as a distinct group who followed Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. But to some extent Matthew presents them also as representatives of the entire church in the period between Jesus' resurrection and second coming. For example, Jesus directs each of the five major speeches to the 12 disciples during His earthly ministry (5:1; 10:1; 13:36; 18:1; 24:1); but the content of these speeches pertains not just to the Twelve during the earthly life of Jesus but to all Christians in the time after Jesus' resurrection. Moreover, at the end of the gospel Jesus promises the Eleven that "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:16-20). Yet the reader of Matthew's gospel realizes that the end of the age will come sometime after the lifetime of the Eleven (24:14). Thus, the "eleven" represent the church from the resurrection to the return of Christ.

The interactions Jesus has with the religious and political authorities involve conflict. Matthew repeatedly emphasizes the differences between Jesus and the leaders of Israel. We have seen that a complete agreement exists between what Jesus does and what he teaches others to do; but the religious authorities are "hypocrites" who teach one thing and do another (15:7; 22:18; 23:13-15, 28). The political leaders ("rulers of the Gentiles," 20:25) abuse and dominate those under their authority; but Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). Herod the Great (2:1-23) as well as the chief priests, the elders of the people, and teachers of the law (26:1—27:54) serve as extreme examples of the destructive potential of sinfulness. Thus, by considering how Matthew contrasts Jesus with these opponents we can discern in depth and detail what God wills for human life over against these perverse and destructive alternatives.

Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel

The gospel contains approximately 50 references to "king" or "kingdom." It mentions "kingdom of heaven" 33 times; and on four occasions it speaks of "kingdom of God." These two phrases seem

to refer to the same thing: the rule of God that God would establish at the end to bring salvation and judgment. When Jesus declared that this kingdom "has come near" (4:17) he meant both that it has already begun to be experienced in His ministry, death and resurrection (12:28), and that God would bring it to full completion and realization at Jesus' second coming (13:43; 25:34, 46).

Matthew used "kingdom of heaven" (and he is the only New Testament writer to do so) probably in order to avoid using the name of God. First-century Jews (and Jewish Christians) held the name of God in great reverence. Indeed, they thought that even saying the word "God" cheapened God's name; and consequently they developed a number of ways of talking about God without using the divine name explicitly. One of these ways involved substituting the place where God dwelt ("heaven") for the name of God.

In addition, Matthew may have used "kingdom of heaven" to stress the great difference between God's kingdom and the kingdoms, or power structures, of this world. Indeed, Matthew's gospel insists that the kingdom of heaven/God stands in radical contrast to typical human ways of thinking and of evaluating things. Thus, the beatitudes turn the common notion of well-being or blessedness on its head (5:3-12). Moreover, whereas people in general understand status in terms of positions of honor, in the kingdom status belongs to those who assume the role of children (18:4). And, whereas persons in general understand power in terms of might, manipulation, and the prerogatives of office, in the kingdom the power of God is expressed in human weakness (Matthew 26—27).

Ending of Matthew's Gospel

We note that Matthew brings his gospel to a climax, or a high point of culmination, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 26—28), and especially in the "Great Commission" of 28:16-20. This final passage in Matthew's gospel is actually a resurrection appearance; and it is the only time in Matthew that Jesus revealed himself to His church after His resurrection. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus typically limited His ministry to the people of Israel (15:24) and instructed His disciples to do the same (10:5-6). But now that He has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (28:18), He commanded them to "make disciples of all nations." The aggressive, global mission of the church stems directly from the all-inclusive authority over the universe that God gave to Jesus when He raised Him from the dead. And as the church engages in this universal mission, it is assured of the empowering and overcoming presence of Christ (28:20; compare 28:11-15), which is actually the presence of God himself; for Jesus is "Immanuel, God with us" (1:21-23).

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