

HOW TO STUDY THE GOSPELS

a.k.a. “harmony of the evangelists”

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

—SYNOPTIC GOSPELS — *synoptic* = “to see together”

Our understanding of Scripture is never perfect, and this means that there may be cases where we will be unable to find a solution to a difficult passage at the present time. This may be because the linguistic, historical, or contextual evidence we need to understand the passage correctly is presently unknown to us.”

—Wayne Grudem

Why 4 gospels?

- Together they give us a more complete picture of Christ.
- The more witnesses, the more compelling the argument.
- Different audiences, different emphases

—MATTHEW

One of the 12 Apostles. Former tax collector. Jewish audience. Uses a lot of Old Testament passages to show that Jesus is the expected Messiah. Organized thematically, not chronologically. Written AD 55–65.

—MARK

Disciple of Apostle Peter. The same Mark who left Paul (Acts 15:39). Gentile audience. Emphasizes actions of Jesus more than teaching. Also emphasizes Jesus as the suffering Servant. Appeared in Rome after Martyrdom of Peter. Written AD 55–59.

—LUKE

Greek physician. Accompanied Paul. Written to Gentile audience. Arranged chronologically. Compiled from different sources. Written AD 58–65.

—JOHN

One of the 12 Apostles. Former fisherman. “The disciple whom Jesus loved.” Written independently of the Synoptic Gospels. Full of “I AM” statements to display divinity of Christ. Begins with “In the beginning was the Word.” Written AD 85–90.

What about apparent “contradictions”?

- Chronology — The temple cleansing: Was it at the beginning or end of Jesus’ ministry? When did Jesus say _____?
- Historical details — E.g., numbers of people: 1 or 2 blind men? 1 or 2 angels?
- Etc.

Important Principles

- All the Gospels are equally inspired. One is not “more true” than the other. They complement each other.
- The authors didn’t always intend to create a chronological itinerary of Jesus’ life. They aren’t meant to be read with a “tape-recorder mentality.”
- A partial report does not mean that it’s a false report.
- Do not assume that similar events are the same event.
- What’s the alternative? Would you rather have four identical accounts with different names? Then we would suspect collusion.
- None of the differences take away from the coherence of the accounts.

HOW TO STUDY PARABLES

What are parables?

Stories or illustrations used for teaching.

Types of Parables

- True Parable — examples: Prodigal Son, 10 Virgins.
- Similitude — example: Leaven in the Meal, mustard seed.
- Metaphor — example: “You are the salt of the earth.”
- Epigram — example: “Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?”

Commonly found in parables:

- Hyperbole — overstatement for the sake of emphasis. Example: “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.”
- Allegory — Details intended to represent other things. Example: Wicked tenants
- “Punch line” — the point of the parable. Example: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

Questions to ask while reading a parable:

- To whom was the parable directed toward?
- What response is Jesus trying to get from the audience?
- How can the allegories be translated into our current day and age?

Principles:

- Keep the scenario in sight—that will help you remember the point of the parable.
- Don’t over-allegorize.
- Remember the audience. Get into their shoes to understand the reference points.
- Translate the reference points into our time.

How not to interpret a parable:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho = Adam

Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell

Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam’s mortality

Thieves = the devil and his angels

Stripped him = namely, of his immortality

Beat him = by persuading him to sin

And left him half-dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he is half-dead

The priest and the Levite = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament

The Samaritan = is said to mean Guardian; therefore Christ himself is meant

Bound his wounds = means binding the restraint of sin

Oil = comfort of good hope

Wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit

Beast = the flesh of Christ’s incarnation

Inn = the church

The morrow = after the Resurrection

Two-pence = promise of this life and life to come

Innkeeper = Paul

[this is called allegorization]

OVER-ALLEGORIZING!