

The Traits of Matthew among the Gospels

The third topic in our work together is the Gospel of Matthew. There are several ways to teach the life of Christ. One is to run all four Gospels together so as to tell one unified story, jumping from John to Luke to Mark to Matthew and picking what's most interesting from each Gospel as we go through the life of Christ. The problem with this is that you do not learn to hear the distinctive voice of Luke, the distinctive voice of Matthew or Mark or John. They're not all the same. They're all selecting the things that they find the most interesting or most important for the audience for which they write. Another way would be to divide up our forty lectures, with ten from Matthew, ten from Mark, ten from Luke, and ten from John, giving us the flavor of each one. But it would be very repetitive. You would end up studying the feeding of the 5,000 four times because it is in all four Gospels.

I'm going to make Matthew our main guide. Matthew is a good book for that. The others are all fine, of course; none of them has any superiority to the other in terms of truth or usefulness. But Matthew's structure is clearer to the 20th century reader than the structure of the other books and it lends itself more easily to the classroom. After we're done with Matthew, we're going to spend the last three nights looking at the distinctive messages of Mark, Luke and John. But basically our book is going to be Matthew.

Again, all four Gospels are good; they're all inspired, they're all the truth, they all lead us to salvation, not one better than the other, and they all have the same basic character. That basic character is a testimony. The four Gospels are all testimonies to the person and the work of Christ. They are written with a purpose in mind, written to accomplish something, to persuade you to do something. Michael Jordan endorses Wheaties. He also eats Wheaties, I think. He (or whoever's endorsing them today) bites into those Wheaties and he smiles; you see how fit and wonderful he is and you want to eat Wheaties too. He says, "They're good, they're great, I eat them, I eat them on screen, I eat them at home and you should eat Wheaties too." That's a testimonial. It's designed to get you to eat Wheaties.

There are some celebrities (I won't name names) who endorse things that they don't use. The Gospels aren't like that. The Gospels are written to endorse something that the author actually believes in. He wants you to believe in what he's presenting. He's saying, "This is the truth and this will do something for you." Some people say that the Gospels are written for a particular purpose and they may not be totally reliable. I say, almost everything is written for a particular purpose. But does that make almost everything unreliable? We always have a purpose in everything we say and everything we do, don't we? If we don't, it's strange, it's odd, and as we said earlier, there are many reasons for believing that the Gospels are very reliable. The Gospels are written, then, with a purpose in view. All four tell us what that purpose is. We're going to be looking mostly at the purpose of Matthew, but I want to show you that all four have a goal in mind.

The Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verse 1 says, "The beginning of the Gospel of [or about] Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Now you may say, "That doesn't tell us the purpose but only tells us what the book is." But the word 'Gospel' didn't mean 'the four Gospels' until much later. Mark (or maybe Matthew; it's hard to tell) was probably the first Gospel written and when he uses the word 'Gospel' or 'evangelium' that word meant 'a decree of joyful tidings.' Many of you have heard that the word 'Gospel' means 'good news.' That's true, but it's not just any old good news, like your favorite baseball team won, or there was a little bit of rain last night that spruced up the flowers.

Rather, it means an announcement of broad significance. For example, when an emperor had a son born into his family, he sent out a decree saying, “Evangelium, good news, gospel...” When it was the birthday of Emperor Augustus or Octavian and he wanted everybody to celebrate, the decree said, “Good news! The birthday of the god Augustus (or Octavian) is coming! Evangelium, gospel! Joyful tidings for the world!”

So the word ‘Gospel’ in Mark 1:1, “the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ,” has the idea of an announcement of important news, important for the empire. Jesus is not being proclaimed as an emperor, of course, but this is official language, saying, “Here is an event that has significance for the world.” Mark says, “I’m beginning to tell you that this event is good news concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” and even those words tell us what Mark is all about. The word ‘Jesus’ means ‘Savior, Christ, Messiah, anointed one.’ The anointed one who is the Savior, who is the Son of God, has come and His birth is a vital announcement of wonderful news for this world. That’s what the first verse of Mark tells us and the book unfolds until people recognize it.

Luke also tells us why he wrote. Luke 1:1-4 says, “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us” [notice that word ‘fulfilled,’ alluding to the Old Testament], “just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.” Luke is saying that he didn’t necessarily see all that much himself, but he has talked to those who did. That little word ‘handed down’ does not mean just, ‘here’s something you might be interested in; let me just pass this t-shirt down to you.’ It means more like ‘to deliver over a document, to take care of something that is valuable, that has been stored up, and has to be preserved and given to the next generation.’ That’s what ‘handed down’ means; others have cared for these things and now he does too. “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.” Luke is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he is also a researcher. The Holy Spirit speaks through him, but he also uses natural processes. Luke has interviewed people, talked to the eye witnesses, gathered an orderly account, and now he is presenting it to a man named Theophilus. Nobody really knows who Theophilus was. Some people say the name Theophilus means ‘lover of God.’ The word ‘theos’ means God and ‘philia’/‘philiias’ means brotherly love, so ‘the one who has love or affection or friendliness toward God.’ Maybe this is a fictitious person, representing anybody who loves God. But it is more likely that there was an actual man named Theophilus, perhaps a wealthy man who could afford to make copies and spread them around to his friends and community.

Why is Luke writing this orderly account for Theophilus? “So that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” Luke says, “I’ve talked to eye witnesses, I’ve investigated, I’ve gathered orderly accounts and I’ve written it all down, not just as an exercise in history writing but so that you may know the certainty of the things that you’ve been taught.” Theophilus was almost certainly a believer, but a novice, a newcomer to the faith. He had heard a bit here and a snatch there, maybe some quotes from Jesus and some accounts of some miracles. Certainly he would have heard about Jesus’ death and resurrection. But nothing in an orderly way, nothing orderly enough for the sake of Theophilus and the friends of Theophilus. So while Mark is announcing good news, Luke is writing to take believers to the next step.

We will talk about the Gospel of John later, but let’s note those great final statements in John 21:25: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” John is saying, “I’ve selected the things you really need to know. I could write pages and pages, but I’ve selected the things you really need to know.” What is his goal? John 20:31 says, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus

is the Christ,” [or it could be translated ‘that the Christ is Jesus’] “the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” That is why John writes.

Why does Matthew write? Matthew does not state his purpose statement as clearly as Luke and John do, but he gives us a couple of pretty strong clues. The first is Matthew 13:52. After Jesus had taught His disciples about the kingdom in a number of parables, He said, “‘Have you understood all these things?’ ‘Yes,’ they replied. He said to them, ‘Therefore if it is true, if you have understood, every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’” Why did Matthew write this? To give instructed people treasures that they should bring out of their storehouse. The new treasures are the treasures of Christ. The old treasures are the treasures of the Old Testament.

The second clue regarding Matthew’s purpose is Matthew 28:18-20: “All authority has been given to Me, therefore go and make disciples of all the nations.” That is why Matthew’s Gospel is written as well, to make disciples of the nations. He is giving people treasures, things that will enable them to make disciples of the nations so that people can teach and be taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded.

Does Matthew have any particular angle? One often hears that Matthew is the Gospel written for the Jews. There is a lot of truth to that. There are many reasons to believe that Matthew wrote for the Jews. First, he wrote things that would be most easily understood by a Jew. All kinds of Jewish customs show up in the Gospel of Matthew (more than any other Gospels), such as Sabbath regulations, washing of hands, the idea of fasting and paying temple taxes. He also described things in a Jewish sort of way, for example, the debate about divorce. The question particularly is, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce for any and every reason?” Matthew’s wording is exactly how the rabbis in Jesus’ day debated it; none of the other Gospels puts the question precisely that way. Jews didn’t debate whether it was okay to get a divorce, since they all agreed on that. What they wanted to know was, “Exactly how loose are the rules? May we divorce for any and every reason?”

Matthew quotes the Old Testament and refers to Old Testament characters far more than any other Gospel, noting David, Jonah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Matthew uses terms that would not offend a Jew. For example, he calls the kingdom ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ whereas Mark, Luke, and John call it ‘the kingdom of God.’ Jews did not want to say the name God, for fear of blaspheming, so Matthew uses the phrase ‘the kingdom of heaven’ many times (though not every time).

Matthew is most easily read by a Jew. He addresses Jewish sort of concerns. For example, in the genealogy of Christ Matthew goes back to Abraham, father of the Jews, to assure the Jews that Jesus is a Jew and is the Messiah from the line of the Jewish kings. Luke’s genealogy, on the other hand, goes back to Adam, because Luke is written for Theophilus, for the Greek audience. Matthew is written for a Jewish audience, so there are many references to the law and Jesus’ interaction with the law. It is in Matthew that Jesus seems to be most interested in the Jews: “I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Only Matthew’s Gospel records that Gentiles (in the form of the magi) come to worship Jesus, fulfilling prophecies about the leaders of the nations coming to Jerusalem to worship the king. Matthew appeals to and makes sense to a Jew, but it’s not simply the Gospel for the Jews. Matthew 10:5-6 does say, “Go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But Matthew 28:18-20 says that the disciples shall go to all the nations, which includes the Gentiles.

There are also some interesting places in which Matthew seems to be having fun with prejudiced people who think that Christ is their private possession. Maybe you can apply it to yourself in the way that you

see fit. I'm not going to preach in this class, but I'll occasionally mention where you might meditate on something.

In Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus is outside of Israel, in the land of Tyre and Sidon, some dozens of miles north of Galilee, much more than 100 miles away from Jerusalem. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to Him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me; my daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." The original language gives the idea that she was crying out for Him for a while, not just once, but maybe again and again. "Jesus did not answer a word." She was walking behind Him but He doesn't even say one word or even perhaps turn His head. "The disciples came and urged Him, 'Send her away, she keeps crying out after us.'" They were clearly sick of her and Jesus, for once doing exactly what the disciples wanted, said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "I don't have anything for you. You're not an Israelite, I have nothing for you." Jesus dismissed her, but she would not go away; she persisted. She falls down in front of Him, like some woman with no dignity, kneeling and pleading, "Lord, help me." Jesus replies, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." The disciples would be thinking something like, "That's the way, Jesus. That'll teach her. Call her a dog. That's right. We are the children and we get the bread. Call her a dog and maybe she'll leave." The woman answers, "Yes Lord, I'm a dog, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Now, if I were a disciple, I would be saying, "I can't wait to hear what Jesus is going to say next because Jesus always has the last word; nobody ever beats him in verbal combat. He's going to put her in her place." But Jesus answers, "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted." What a shock for the disciples! Men weren't even supposed to talk to women but here is a Gentile woman who just beat Jesus in verbal combat! She got everything she wanted.

Here we see another aspect of the book of Matthew: Jesus often doesn't explain Himself to His disciples. In this passage He doesn't explain Himself at all and doesn't say a word to the disciples. The disciples must have been shocked for days, wrestling with this and pondering what on earth it meant. Through this encounter they came face to face with their prejudice. They thought that Jesus was for them, for their group, for their kind of person. Now they saw that Jesus does have something for a Syrophenician woman. How did the woman's daughter get demon possessed anyway? What kind of mother was she? Nevertheless Jesus had something for a simple, demon-involved Syrophenician woman. The question for the disciples, and everybody who reads the Gospel of Matthew, is, "Do you think that Jesus is just for you and your little group? First the Jews and some other little group?" This story will knock that away from you. Yes, the Gospel of Matthew is for the Jews, but it's not for the Jews in a narrow sense. It's for the Jews to say to the world, "All your hope will be fulfilled in Christ." Jesus is the heir of Abraham, the heir of David, the heir of the promises. He is the Messiah who is fulfilling the Scriptures. He's not your possession; He is your Messiah to share with the world. That is the charge of the Gospel of Matthew: take this Gospel and share it with the world in such a way as to not only tell the story, but to make disciples. That's the central plot. In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus says, "Go into all the world." He does not say, "Go into all the world and teach the Gospel," but, "Go into all the world and make disciples." There is a difference.

I sometimes ask people the question, "What's the greatest thing a Christian can do?" Many say, "Lead somebody to Christ." But that is not the greatest thing. The greatest thing a Christian can do is lead someone to Christ and then work with him and train him to the point that he can lead others to Christ. That's the greatest thing. Take him to full maturity and the ability to make disciples, who in turn evangelize and make others into full-fledged disciples. That's the greatest thing and that's the goal of the Gospel of Matthew.

We will see how Matthew fleshes this out, but there's a key term I want to introduce even now. We'll have a chance to revisit it. The key term is "Men of little faith." In Greek it's all one word, 'oligopista.' In English it's several words, 'men of little faith' or 'little faith ones.' This is what the disciples are. The term only appears once in Luke but in Matthew it appears about five times, at crucial points. When we read a story (and Matthew is a story, a truthful one), we look for somebody to identify with, to resonate with. When you watch a movie, read a novel, you want to identify with the hero. With whom could you resonate in the Gospel? Pharisees, Sadducees, high priests? No. How about the crowd; could you resonate with them? They don't seem to get the point very much. Many times they're following Jesus for all the wrong reasons, for the sake of the miracles. How about Jesus; can you identify with Jesus? That's a stretch; that's presumptuous.

How about the disciples? Matthew presents the disciples as people who are a lot like us, misconstruing so many things, men of little faith. Matthew 14:22-32 tells of Peter walking on the water. Imagine it—a boat on the sea, tossed by the storm, five o'clock in the morning and the disciples have been out there rowing for hours. They think there's a ghost and the ghost says, "No I'm not a ghost, I'm Jesus." Peter says, "If it's You, command me to come in the water." Imagine being in the boat! The boats that they used were not little dinghies like you see in Sunday school pictures. They were thirty or forty feet long and could hold thousands of fish so if you walked off the edge of the boat it was six feet down to the water. Peter has enough faith to walk to Jesus, in the middle of the night. Then as He gets to Jesus he has enough 'unfaith' to look at the waves and sink. But he has enough faith to say, "Lord save me." He doesn't just say, "I'm drowning." He says, "Lord save me, I'm drowning." He's drowning, that's unfaith; he said, "Lord, save me." That's faith. That's the disciples. Men of a little faith. How much faith? Enough faith that by the end of the story, they were no longer men of little faith. They were apostles. By the end of the story, they were no longer men of little faith, but they were God's agents to change the world.

Can you identify with that? That is a noble thing, even if you are early in your life as a Christian, even if you are just taking your first steps. You can say, "Yes, I'm like that, I'm little faith. I have just enough faith to step out and not enough to fall down, but if God is doing His work in me through the Gospel of Matthew, then I can grow out of a little faith and become more faith and become an apostle, one sent by God to change His world."