

How to Understand and Apply the Bible

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Interpreting the Gospels

Challenges in understanding the gospels...

1. The relationship between them is complicated!

Matthew 9	Mark 2	Luke 5
<p>⁹ As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting in the tax collector's office; and He *said to him, "Follow Me!"</p> <p>And he got up and followed Him.</p> <p>¹⁰ Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining <i>at the table</i> in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and <i>began</i> dining with Jesus and His disciples.</p>	<p>¹⁴ As He passed by, He saw Levi the <i>son</i> of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He *said to him, "Follow Me!"</p> <p>And he got up and followed Him.</p> <p>¹⁵ And it *happened that He was reclining <i>at the table</i> in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many <i>of them</i>, and they were following Him.</p>	<p>²⁷ After that He went out and looked at a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me." ²⁸ And he left everything behind, and got up and <i>began</i> following Him.</p> <p>²⁹ And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and other <i>people</i> who were reclining <i>at the table</i> with them.</p>

2. Jesus did not write the gospels; they include his teachings interspersed between narratives, but each author has a ministry-objective in how they organized their gospel.
3. Jesus spoke primarily Aramaic, but the gospels are written in Greek.

4. The gospel writers did not create content, but they had to decide what content to use to fulfill their objectives, and they had a realistic limit on how much content they could include.

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

Gospel of Mark

Mark was writing to Gentiles (probably from Rome).

1. Jesus was the promised Messiah
2. Jesus had power over the physical world
3. Jesus suffered and died as an obedient servant, but this was intentional and therefore not a cause for shame

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:31-33)

Gospel of Matthew

Matthew was writing to a mixed church that was actively evangelizing the Jews.

1. Jesus was the Messianic King in the lineage of David, in fulfillment of prophecy. 11 times: "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets" (1:22; 2:5; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4)

¹⁶ When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷ **This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:**
"He took up our infirmities
and bore our diseases." (Matt 8:16-17)

¹⁵ Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. ¹⁶ He warned them not to tell others about him. ¹⁷ **This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:**

¹⁸ “Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations. (Matt 12:15-18)

2. With the arrival of the King also comes the need to live out the morals of the kingdom (and not focus on superficial religiosity)
3. The coming kingdom is in fulfillment of God’s promise to bring salvation to the world (Matt 28:16-20)

Outline of the Gospel of Matthew

- Opening (1:1-2:23)
- Body (3:1-28:15)
 - Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)
 - Commissioning of Apostles (10:1-42)
 - Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-52)
 - Relationships within the Kingdom (18:1-35)
 - Olivet Discourse (24:1-25:46)
- Closing (28:16-20)

Gospel of Luke

1. Luke is writing to Gentiles, introducing them to salvation in Christ and explaining the origins of that salvation in the ministry of Jesus Christ (1:4). He acknowledges using various eyewitness sources and mentions other gospel writers (1:1).
2. Luke highlights the universal aspects of Jesus’ ministry—that Jesus was always focused outside the bounds of traditional Judaism.

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:
“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:28-32)

⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:
“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And **all people** will see God's salvation.'" (Luke 3:4-6)

3. The Gospel of Luke is one half of a larger work and should be read and understood in connection with the Acts of the Apostles.

Gospel of John

1. John expresses the purpose of his gospel near the end of his gospel: he wrote to share his own experience so that the reader would similarly believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and would obtain eternal life. He therefore reveals the nature and object of saving faith. His message would be most compelling to Hellenistic Jews.

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

2. John's gospel was probably written later than the others and doesn't use sources other than his own recollection. He probably found the earlier gospels insufficient for his purpose.
3. A key theme in his gospel is the idea that everyone missed the significance of who Jesus really was during his ministry (1:10-11), but in reflection, this was by design. Jesus spoke to inspire faith in those who could finally recognize and trust in him.

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:22)

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. (John 12:16)

4. John uses Old Testament symbols to reveal that Jesus is the Son of God (Ps 2:7-8):
 - Jesus as shepherd (Ezek 34)
 - Jesus as the vine (Isa 5:1-7)
 - Jesus as the Bread of Life (Exod 16:4; Ps 78:24)

The Form of Jesus' Teaching

Overstatement (exaggeration)

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25-26)

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell." (Mark 9:43-45)

Hyperbole (gross exaggeration/impossibility)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (Matt 23:23-24)

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matt 7:3-5)

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:24-25)

Authority (Amen)

"For **truly** I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Matt 5:18)

"**Truly** I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." (Matt 10:15)

"**Truly** I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15)

"**Truly** I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown." (Luke 4:24)

“Very **truly** I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” (John 5:25)

Compare with:

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the **Amen**, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” (Rev 3:14)

Pun/Double-meaning

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (Matt 16:18)

He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59-60)

Simile

“I am sending you out **like** sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd **as** snakes and as innocent **as** doves.” (Matt 10:16)

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, **as** a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13:34)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are **like** whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.” (Matt 23:27)

Metaphor

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (Matt 5:13)

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Matt 9:37-38)

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matt 23:33)

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Proverb

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matt 6:34)

Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” (Mark 3:24)

Riddle

“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’” (Mark 14:58)

He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’” (Luke 13:32)

“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt 9:13)

Paradox

“For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.” (Mark 4:22)

“The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matt 23:11)

“For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Matt 25:29)

“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.” (Luke 12:2-3)

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25-28)

***A fortiori* statement (“If... how much more...”)**

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:9-11)

“It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (Matt 10:25)

Irony (i.e., opposite of expectations)

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” (Matt 16:1-3)

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Luke 12:16-20)

The Kingdom as the Central Point in Jesus’ Teaching

1. The terms *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God* are synonymous.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the **kingdom of heaven**. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the **kingdom of God**.” (Matt 19:23-24)

2. The kingdom is a literal, earthly fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel in the Old Testament.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne

and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.
 The zeal of the LORD Almighty
 will accomplish this. (Isa 9:6-7)

3. With Jesus' arrival, the kingdom is here (in a sense):

"Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Luke 11:19-20)

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst." (Luke 17:20-21)

4. The fulfillment of the kingdom is in the future:

He said to them, "When you pray, say: "'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.'" (Luke 11:2)

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt 7:21)

"Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:25)

5. Solution—The kingdom develops over time:

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." (Mark 4:30-32)

Sample Passage: John 3

John 3	
¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a	

teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.