

Understanding Scripture Class

Session 6: Gospels and Acts

Recap:

Biblical hermeneutics is the craft of interpreting Scripture.

1. *Grasping the Text in Their Town (What Does it Say?)*
2. *Measuring the Width of the River to Cross (What Does it Mean?)*
3. *Crossing the Principizing Bridge (Where is Jesus?)*
4. *Grasping the Text in Their Town (How Can I Apply It?)*

Interpreting the Gospels:

I. What are Gospels?

Gospel means good news. In Scripture, the good news proclaimed on every page is that of God redeeming sinful humans through Jesus Christ, so in a very real sense, the Gospel is the main point of all Scripture. But Gospel is also a literary genre unique to Scripture. The first four books of the New Testament are all called Gospels because they exhibit this special literary form.

Gospel Genre: Gospels are essentially collections of stories about the ministry of Jesus and his teachings during his time on Earth.

- A. Biographical, but not like modern biography.
 1. They do not try to record every noteworthy event.
 2. They are not concerned with precise chronological order.
 3. They are much more than recorded history.
- B. Transformational, not just instructional
 1. They are persuasive: Jesus is proven to be God
 - a. Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy
 - b. Miracles / Signs
 - c. Testimony of Witnesses (John/Disciples)
 - d. Testimony of God (at Baptism/Transfiguration)
 - e. Resurrection / Ascension
 2. They claim Truth
 - a. The recorded events and teachings are certain (Luke 1:4)
 - b. Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6)
 3. They make demands on the reader
 - a. Repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15)
 - b. You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:48)

- c. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life. (John 3:36)
- 4. Many different genres are used to communicate the story
 - a. History
 - b. Biography
 - c. Law (Matthew)
 - d. Wisdom Literature
 - e. Prophecy
 - f. Apocalyptic
 - g. Parables
 - h. Letter (Luke-Acts)

II. Special Literary Forms in the Gospels – Christ’s Teachings

Jesus often communicated truth in unique attention grabbing ways. Some examples include:

- A. Exaggeration / Hyperbole
“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out” (Mt 5:29)
- B. Metaphor and Simile
“I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5)
- C. Narrative Irony
“As he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and fell on his face at Jesus feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:12-18)
- D. Parables
“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:30-32)

III. Purpose of the Gospels

Each gospel tells the story of Christ differently and for different audiences but they all have the same goal in mind—Jesus purposely died on the cross to save sinners. Believe Him.

A. Matthew

1. Matthew proves that Jesus fulfills Messianic prophecies and promises. It was written primarily for Jews who knew their Old Testament well.
2. Repeated phrases include: “What was spoken by the prophets was fulfilled” and “It is written”

B. Mark

1. Mark provides an introductory account of the life of Christ. It states the essential elements of the gospel story, clearly demonstrating the divinity of Jesus who purposely and willingly laid it all down to die on the cross.
2. Repeated phrase: “Immediately / Straightway” [εὐθὺς]
3. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark 1:3)
[εὐθεΐας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ]

C. Luke

1. Luke is Part 1 of a scholarly exposition of the story of Christ and his church. It declares the unfolding of God’s plan to for his Son to become a man, live a sinless life, die on the cross, rise from the dead, ascend to heaven. The story of how this gospel revolutionizes the world is continued in Part 2 (Acts).
2. Luke is a well written letter to a Greek named Theophilus for the purpose of giving “certainty concerning the things” he has been taught. (Luke 1:4)

D. John

1. John was the last gospel written. It was completed after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70AD when many of the distinctions between Jewish and Gentile believers had disappeared.
2. John’s gospel is very different from the three “synoptic” gospels that preceded it. However it declares the same essential message and gives the clearest purpose statement of any gospel.
3. Consider the following:
“Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:27-31)

IV. Understanding the Book of Acts

Acts is the “sequel” to the Gospel of Luke. Written by the same author, it is Part 2 of the story of the Gospel and its propagation towards the ends of the earth.

A. Genres within Acts

- History
- Letter (to Theophilus)
- Sermons
- Prophecy (quoted)

B. Purpose Statement

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

1. Narrative unfolds according to this plan: It proceeds from Jerusalem -> Judea -> Samaria -> End of the Earth.
2. Demonstrates “chiastic” structure when combined with Luke:
 - a. Luke begins with Caesar in Rome and journeys toward Jerusalem.
 - b. Acts begins in Jerusalem and journeys toward Caesar in Rome.

C. Common Themes

1. The Gospel is unstoppable. It always spreads.
 - a. Acts 7-8: Stephen martyred -> Samaria hears the gospel
 - b. Acts 16: Paul & Silas jailed -> Philippian church born
 - c. Acts 27-28: Paul shipwrecked -> Isle of Malta converted
2. The Gospel is effective. It creates churches in its wake, with each church different and uniquely suited to the surrounding culture.
 - a. Acts 2-5: Jerusalem
 - b. Acts 11: Antioch
 - c. Acts 16-17: Macedonian churches
 - d. Acts 18: Corinth
 - e. Acts 19: Ephesus