

A SURPRISE THAT SHOULDN'T BE A SURPRISE

It is a surprise to most of Christendom today that the message of Salvation (we will use the term *Gospel*) as we know it today is not discoverable in Matthew, Mark, or Luke (the synoptics). Even the fourth Gospel, as we shall see, presents a very different message when taken as a whole.

This surprise shouldn't be a surprise. After all, the completed work of Christ is foundational to the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The four Gospels (as we have come to call them), are almost totally in reference to material *before* the Cross.

Jerome, in his fourth century work of translating the Scriptures into Latin is the one who set the paradigm on which the Gospels have been understood for centuries. It is that work that created the concept of the four Gospels being in what we call the *New Testament*. In adopting this paradigm, the church made the error of reading the work of Jesus as *something other than the fulfillment of prophecy*. Theologians set Jesus' work *away from* the Hebrew Scriptures, and thus created a new dispensation with the birth of Jesus. If this was not formally done, it was practically done. To test the assumption, simply have a pastor comment on this statement: *Jesus ministered to Israel under the Law and gave instructions for how the nation could receive her promised Kingdom but did not give instruction on how to be saved outside the law of Moses*. Most pastors and theologians will immediately protest (though Romans 14:9 says essentially the same thing).

When we begin to see the Gospels as part of Hebrew prophecy rather than the beginning of that which was *new* and *unrevealed* (Col. 1:26), then we begin to recognize how *very different* the message of the Gospels is from the Gospel we present today.

THE GOSPEL IN THE SYNOPTICS

If we consider the saving Gospel to be to **by grace through faith** (Eph. 2:8) based on the completed work of Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-4), then we find *none of this* in the synoptic Gospels. But we do find a consistent message of obedience to the Law and personal righteousness under the Law as the basis for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7 clearly displays entry into the Kingdom of Heaven based on obedience to the Law and personal righteousness. Most Christians do not see this because they have been repeatedly told that passages like the ones we will consider are about *rewards of salvation* not *entry into salvation*. I challenge you to look at these verses for what they say, not what you may have been told they say.

The *Beatitudes* of Matthew 5:1-10 have three verses that teach kingdom-salvation based on personal merit. Matthew 5:3 says **Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**. If the Kingdom is equated with salvation (as so often wrongly taught), then Jesus begins His famous sermon teaching that a *poverty in spirit* is the way to achieve it. Similarly, in Matthew 5:8 He says, **Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God**. But what would happen today if an evangelist was asked, "How might I see God?" and his response was Matthew 5:8? Another criteria for having the Kingdom is found in Matthew 5:10, when Jesus proclaims, **Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**. Could these three passages be any more clear? To have the Kingdom of heaven and to see God, have a poverty of spirit which endures persecution, along with a pureness of heart, and you shall both have the Kingdom and see God. Is this not what the passages *actually say*? Shall we take them literally or shall we allegorize them?

Continuing, Jesus says **That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven** (Mt. 5:20). While Christian teachers want to make this some kind of proof that personal righteousness cannot get you to heaven, the Lord clearly referred to **your righteousness**. What conclusion would a hearer of Jesus make other than believing that he or she had to live a perfectly righteous life? In fact, two verses later Jesus says that **whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire** (Mt. 5:22). Does this, too, mean something other than what it seems to mean? Or is it yet further evidence that Jesus was teaching a standard of personal righteousness for entry and continuance in the Kingdom?

If these verses have not yet convinced you that Jesus taught personal righteousness as the standard, consider Matthew 5:29-30, which teach that a wayward eye or hand could cause **that thy whole body should be cast into hell**. Wouldn't the normal, contextual interpretation of those words cause one to conclude that *to avoid hell, I must live a holy life*?

Yet a few verses later Jesus insists that His followers **Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you** (Mt. 5:44). And what would be the reason? Is it for rewards of salvation or fellowship? Jesus answers in verse 45, **That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven**. Wouldn't the evangelical say that to be a *child of God* meant *to be saved*? Yet this pathway to being one of God's children is *not the message that would be preached today*.

And what should the evangelical do with Matthew 6:14-15, which speaks in clear terms about the forgiveness of sins? The verses say--

14. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Under what form of the Christian Gospel today is forgiveness of sins tied to forgiving others? And under what circumstances could a person be saved if the Father had *not forgiven you of your sins*?

There is so much more, all based on the same *personal qualifications* criteria. For example, in Matthew 3:2 John the Baptist came preaching, **Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**. Jesus adopted these same words in Matthew 4:17 (see also Mark 1:15 and 6:12). Jesus then spoke of enduring persecution and said clearly that **he that endureth to the end shall be saved** (Mt. 10:22, 24:13, Mk. 13:13). Can *repentance* and *endurance* somehow be so twisted so as *not to become works*? If so, words have simply lost their meaning (and thus the Gospel has lost its meaning also).

There are so many other passages that could be considered. For example, consider this representative list:

- Matthew 19:16-28 (see also Mk. 10:17-26, Lk. 18:18-26)
- Mark 16:16-17
- Luke 1:68-71
- Luke. 7:44-50
- Luke. 8:12
- Luke. 13:1-5
- Luke 13:22-24
- Luke 18:35-43

Rather than be dismissive of the overwhelming evidence that *a Gospel based on personal righteousness* was presented in the Gospels, why not accept the fact that *the Gospel must be rightly divided*?

THE GOSPEL IN JOHN

Some may object, pointing to the fourth Gospel as filled with *faith alone* passages. But even then, we must ask *why the first three Gospels do not present the same message as the fourth*? Why is there scarcely a hint of the "believe and be saved" message that can be found in John? Isn't this of some mild interest? Isn't this evidence that the Gospel must be rightly divided, as are the four Gospels?

Passages such as John 3:16-18, 5:34, 10:9, and others do teach the priority (and even exclusivity) of *belief* as the foundation for salvation. While this study is not designed to go into the differences between the synoptics and the fourth Gospel, it doesn't take an advanced theologian to recognize that *John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. This alone stands as evidence that one must *rightly divide the Gospel*. In very short order, I believe that the reason we read of the Gospel of Grace in John has to do with the timing of which it was written, coming long after the first three, and certainly at a time with the *mystery* had been revealed. Even at this, I would not recommend the Gospel of John as the place from which to proclaim the message we share today.