

“WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE? I – THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW”

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Matthew 5:1-20

Not long ago, I was reading the obituaries in the Wilmington News Journal and saw that a former parishioner of mine from Aldersgate Church had died. Her name was Doris, and she was a sweet, sweet woman. She had had a rough life in many ways, but she persevered through it all with a wonderful countenance. She was a committed Christian and a committed member of Aldersgate. She served in lots of different ways and was a decades long member of their choir. She had been in church for as long as she could remember.

Doris is also the person who gave me what was perhaps one of the greatest insights I ever had into ministry. Let me tell you why. Years and years ago, when the great Disciple Bible Study was first published, I led the very first study of it at Aldersgate, and Doris was one of the twelve persons with whom I worked. On the first night, we were doing some general review kind of stuff, and I asked the group to turn to the gospels, and Doris said (and I remember it like it was yesterday), “What are the gospels?”

This from a life-long church goer, a committed, regularly-attending life-long church goer! In that moment, I learned that I could never assume things about what people know about the Bible, and the longer I go in ministry, the more that is true – especially because many, many people today did not grow up in church and did not go to Sunday School.

Which brings me now to the reason I’m offering this sermon series that starts today – which I’ve called “What’s the Difference?” For four Sundays (not all consecutively, though, because of some special occasions coming up); but for four Sundays, I’m going to talk about the four gospels – actually, probably “teach” about them, would be a better way of putting it.

For some of you, it will be review; but for some, I think it will be new information. At any rate, I hope you will find it helpful and enlightening. Just for kicks, let me throw a few questions your way, and see how you do.

- What are the names of the four gospels?
- Who wrote them? (Oh, that’s a little trickier!)
- Were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all Jesus’ disciples?
- Why were the gospels written?
- To whom were they written?
- When were they written?

- Which one is the longest? Which one is the shortest?
- Which one of the four is very different from the three others?

How do you think you did on that little quiz? Well, however you did, I think that by the end of this sermon series, you'll have all those questions answered and more.

This morning, before I get started with Matthew, I'd like to give you a little background on the gospels as a whole.

The four gospels were written generally between the years of 70 and 90 AD. Scholars vary widely in their approximation of dates, but generally they agree upon that time span. And it is generally accepted that Mark was the first gospel written, and the others followed.

Now, why were they actually written? Well, if you think about that time span, 70 – 90 AD, you begin to see that those who had been the eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and ministry were dying off. As Adam Hamilton puts it, "As long as the disciples were alive, there was no urgency in writing down the story. The disciples shared it with others, who shared it with others. In fact, oral presentation by an eyewitness was valued far above anything written (he continues). But with the death of the apostles, some understood the importance of capturing in writing the story of Jesus' life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection as the eyewitnesses had told it." (Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p. 90)

And so, the gospels were written, so that the witness of those who had been there, would live on. (Just an interesting side note – some of the other books of the New Testament were written before the gospels – perhaps as many as twenty years earlier. Remember, many of those were in the form of letters written to the early church, guiding them through their growing pains.) I think, because of the order of their placement in the New Testament, we tend to think that the gospels were written first, but that is incorrect. They came some years after some of the other New Testament writings.

Let's turn now to Matthew – the first gospel in the New Testament. If you answered yes, to my question about whether the gospel writers were Jesus' disciples, in this case, you are right. Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples, he is listed as Matthew, the tax collector. Born in Galilee, he was collecting taxes in Capernaum when Jesus called him to be one of his disciples. After he went to dinner at Matthew's house, Jesus came under fire from the Pharisees, for "eating with tax collectors and sinners."

So Matthew was an eyewitness to Jesus' life and ministry. When he sat down to write his words, Matthew had a specific audience in mind (as did the other Gospel writers). This is really important to understand, because it accounts for the differences in the gospels. Each of them wrote for a specific purpose, and most of them wrote for a specific audience.

In Matthew's case, he wrote his words for the Jews. He was trying to convince them of the Lordship of Jesus, that he was indeed, the Messiah they had been waiting for, for generations. His whole purpose is to help them to understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Thus, he begins with a genealogy. I know you know about the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew. You want to know how? Because whenever a person gets a new Bible, and they decide they're going to read straight through it, or at least read straight through the New Testament, they turn to these first few lines of Matthew, and go "Ugh!" It's not an exciting page turner! This one begat that one begat that one, and so on and so on, and it's not terribly exciting – unless, you understand what Matthew was doing.

You see, Matthew, from the get go, is letting the Jews know Jesus' roots – reminding them from whence he comes – that his birth had been foretold for ages – that he was one of them. It's what Matthew will do over and over again in his gospel – refer back to the Old Testament scriptures – some have said that he makes over 350 references back to the Old Testament.

You see, Matthew's not trying to alienate Jews by telling them Jesus is the new thing, he's constantly trying to remind them that their scriptures, the Old Testament, over and over again told about his coming. I mean, if you just flip through the first few chapters, you'll see Matthew quoting Old Testament scripture – in the genealogy, in the angel appearing to Joseph to tell him that Mary was pregnant, in how Herod knew where Jesus was to be born (because of the words in Isaiah) – it goes on and on throughout the gospel. Matthew backs everything about Jesus up with proof from the Old Testament writings and beliefs.

Why? Because he wants them to understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. You heard it in Jesus' own words in the gospel lesson: "I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."

Matthew's link to the Old Testament writings is probably why those who put the Bible together, made it the first gospel, the first book in the New Testament – because it surely is a link between the two.

So the major thrust of Matthew's gospel is a plea to the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. But there are other things that make Matthew special as well. His is the only gospel that contains the beautiful and moving Sermon the Mount.

His gospel also focuses a lot on Jesus' own words – particularly about money – there are more passages of Jesus speaking about money in Matthew than in any other gospel. But that figures, because much of what Matthew records Jesus saying is about how to live our lives, what makes for rich, abundant living. So in Matthew we read things like, "You are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world;" "turn the other cheek, love your enemies;" "do not worry about tomorrow" and so on.

We also hear Jesus talking about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew, giving various descriptions of what it will be like, and how we should be ready for it. And the very last words of the gospel sort of undergird the whole gospel – when Jesus says, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” In other words, in all these ways, in all these things, Matthew reminds us, Jesus, the promised Messiah, is with us and will be with us always.

So, aside from the fact that Matthew proves that Jesus is the Messiah, and aside from the fact that in Matthew, we learn how Jesus wants us to live, what are we supposed to learn from Matthew? What does it mean for us to today?

Well, as I said earlier, Matthew is writing to the Jews, to prove to them who Jesus is, that he is the Messiah, the One come to change the world. Oh my friends, if ever there was a time when the world needed to be convinced of just that, it is now – maybe more than ever. And perhaps it is all of us who need to do the convincing, the proving.

I read a startling report this week that I’m sure some of you read about in the paper as well. It is the results of a Pew research study about religion in our world today, and it is not good.

Let me read you a few things from the report:

- “Christianity still dominates American religious identity (70%), but the survey shows dramatic shifts as more people move out the doors of denominations, shedding spiritual connections along the way.”
- “Atheists and agnostics have nearly doubled their share of the religious marketplace, and **overall indifference to religion of any sort is rising as well.**”
- “Overall, there are more than four former Christians for every convert to Christianity.”
- “Where are they going? To religious nowhere.”
- “The nones (as they are called) – Americans who are unaffiliated with brand-name religion – are the new major force in American faith. And they are more secular in outlook – and more comfortable admitting it than ever before. Their growth spans the generations, as well as racial and ethnic groups.”
- “Nones, at 22.8% of the United States (up from 16 just eight years ago) run second only to evangelicals and ahead of Catholics in religious market share.”
(Religious News Service, “Christians Lose Ground, ‘Nones’ Soar in New Portrait of US Religion”)

Wow! If you have felt like things have been changing over the past few years, you’re right. You probably experience it in your own circle of friends and family.

There are a lot of people right now who are apathetic to religion at all, let alone the life-changing, life-saving Good News of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

So you see what I mean about all of us having the same challenge at Matthew? He wrote with passion to convince the Jews about Jesus. He did everything he could to prove who Jesus was.

What's your proof? To the "nones" in your world, what's your proof? I'm not suggesting you have to write a gospel, but surely you have to have a word ready when the opportunity presents itself. What's your proof to an unbelieving world about Jesus?

Let me give you a little help. Know your story, know your own story of faith and share it in non-threatening ways when the opportunity comes along. Don't bang people over the head with heavy, theological terms and quote after Biblical quote. Just tell them your story, and what Jesus means to you.

Also, live your story. People will come to Jesus far sooner through a life well-lived, and love well-shared, than they ever will by hard-nosed tactics. They'll see sacrifice, and goodness, and kindness and come to know Jesus that way. Your very life and how you live it can be proof to them that there is more – that there is Jesus.

I want to close by telling you how I saw that lived out just this week – how I saw proof that Jesus lives and how he changes lives still today. It was on the Classic Christians' bus trip to Cape Cod. There were 51 of us on the trip – a mixture of members of our church, plus friends and family, and members of other churches. It was a greater mix, a greater variety than we've had on previous trips. Some of the people who were with us are members of other churches, some not members of any church; some very committed Christians, some not at all.

But it was an incredible group, who got along incredibly well, and helped each other along the way. And here is the evidence that Jesus made a difference in this trip. As we were nearing the church Friday evening, returning home, our bus driver, a wonderful, wonderful young man named Jerry, took to the microphone and talked to us. He told us he was from the south, and not wanting to offend or anything, he said he had never experienced a week like this in the north before. He said that he had loved every minute with us, and we were wonderful. There was something different about us.

He didn't name it, but I can. The difference is Jesus. He makes us who we are, his love lives in us, his joy radiates through us, his care helps us care for others.

The difference is Jesus. Matthew knew that so long ago as he wrote to the Jews to convince them to follow him. We know that today, so may we go forth and

be Matthews to the world of “nones” all around us. May we, indeed, be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, with the good news of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. May it be so.

Amen.