

## **Examining Christian Doctrine**

### **Lesson 12: Understanding the Ministry of Christ**

There are four accounts in our Bible about the life and ministry of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each tells us about Jesus' life and ministry from a different perspective. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all share very similar content and are therefore called the 'Synoptic Gospels (seeing together)', while John is very different and usually categorized by itself. These gospels explain what Jesus did and taught during his earthly ministry, they also give an account of the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the events that led up to his death. However, they do not explain theologically what that death and resurrection would mean for the world.

The Epistles, especially the Pauline Epistles, primary focus was on theologically explaining the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation and Christian living, rather than providing a detailed biography or comprehensive presentation of Jesus' teachings. Pauline epistles primarily focus on theological reflections, ethical instructions, and practical guidance for Christian communities. Interestingly, Paul rarely quotes any of Jesus' sayings (less than a handful of times), doesn't allude to any of Jesus' teachings or parables, and says very little about the works of his earthly ministry. This shouldn't be a total surprise considering most of Paul's epistles predate the writing of the Gospels, so what Paul knew came from oral tradition. Still, Paul's emphasis is never on the life and earthly ministry of Jesus, only the effect of his death and resurrection.

### **Understanding Jesus' Earthly Ministry**

There are two aspects of the Work of Christ:

1. His work during his earthly ministry (his teaching and works/miracles)
2. His work of salvation through his death and resurrection.

Jesus' earthly ministry (as well of the event of his death and resurrection) is chronicled in the four books known as the 'Gospels', however, the doctrine of salvation and effects of his death and resurrection are expounded upon in the Epistles. Jesus earthly ministry was centered on the Jewish people, while his salvation was universal and would fully include both Jews and Gentiles.

If we're not careful in recognizing the distinction and differences between Jesus earthly ministry and Jesus' ministry of universal salvation then we will misread, misunderstand, and misapply some of what we read in the Bible. In this lesson we will look at the purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry and mission, the roles he plays in the gospels, and address some of Jesus' controversial statements.

Many Christians would assume (and rightly so) that Jesus was born, lived a perfect life, taught many good things for us to follow, did many miracles to prove he was God, and then died and rose again so we can be saved. Makes sense right? The view I would like to give today challenges this oversimplified view of Jesus' ministry, because when we look at some of Jesus' words and teachings and compare them with the rest of the New Testament, things just don't line up. So is the New Testament self-contradictory, or is there another explanation?

The view I would like to present in this lesson is that concerning the earthly ministry of Jesus: **Jesus came specifically to God's Covenant people Israel at the end of the Old Covenant age, in order that Israel would, through repentance, receive their Messiah as he went about inaugurating the Kingdom of God and establishing a New Covenant.** In other words, Jesus' earthly ministry was 'Covenantal' in nature toward Israel.

### **Who Was Jesus' Earthly Ministry For?**

So what did Jesus say about his earthly ministry?

- **Matthew 10:5-6** "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. (In sending out the twelve)
- **Matthew 15:24** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (In responding to a Canaanite woman)
- **John 1:11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

In two of the above scriptures Jesus references 'the lost sheep of the Israel', we also find in [Luke 19:10](#) Jesus says he came to 'seek and save that which was lost' (KJV). Some translations interpret this simply as 'the lost' which could give a general meaning but the context of this passage is Jesus saving Zacchaeus in which Jesus says, "*because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.*" This indicates that the 'lost' Jesus came to save were children of Abraham.

Jesus' earthly ministry was primarily and almost exclusively to the Jews. The context of his ministry was speaking to the Jews who were under the law. "*But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law...*" ([Galatians 4:4-5](#))

When approaching Jesus' ministry and the gospels, we must be aware of audience relevance. We must discern who Jesus is speaking to and what is the context surrounding his words, because Jesus' ministry was very specific. For example when giving the parable of the Wicked Tenants [Matthew 21:45](#), "*When the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they knew that Jesus was speaking about them*".

Jesus did have some encounters with Gentiles (non-Jewish people), however most of these encounters still contained a message and purpose for Israel (often times highlighting Israel's faithlessness vs. a Gentile person's faith).

One example is the healing of the Roman Centurions servant ([Matt. 8](#)) where Jesus marvels at his faith. In this account Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>12</sup> But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" ([Matt 8:10-12](#))

### **Jesus as an Old Covenant Prophet**

Jesus took on a role similar to Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. The main objective of the prophets were to call the nation back to God in times of apostasy and to warn of impending judgment if they did not.

If you want to understand Jesus' ministry, then you need to understand [Matthew 3](#). Where John the Baptist is preaching and has a confrontation with the Pharisees.

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* ([Matt. 3:7-12](#))

Jesus came to Old Covenant Israel at the end of the Old Covenant age to receive the 'fruit' of Israel and gather the wheat into the barn and to burn up the chaff. This speaks of a separation (which Jesus defines as a harvest) that was happening between those who believe in Jesus Israel, and those who reject Jesus in Israel. We see this comparison all throughout the Gospels: The wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the prodigal son and the son in the house, the rich man and Lazarus, the two men in the temple praying, those coming into the kingdom and those being cast out of the kingdom, the religious Jews and the good Samaritan, etc.

**Jesus showed himself like an Old Covenant prophet by giving parables that condemned unbelieving Israel** (compare [Matthew 21:33-46](#) with [Isaiah 5:1-7](#))

**Jesus showed himself like an Old Covenant prophet by giving 'prophetic woe oracles'** – (compare [Matthew 23](#) with [Isaiah 5:8-30](#))

**Jesus showed himself like an Old Covenant prophet by warning of coming judgment upon unbelieving Israel** – [Matthew 23-24](#), [Luke 21](#), [Matthew 10:15](#), [Luke 13:22-30](#)

**Jesus showed himself like an Old Covenant prophet by performing prophetic acts** -like cursing the fig tree and cleansing the Temple ([Matthew 21](#))

## Putting Jesus' Words in Context

If Jesus came to bring grace to us, then why does it appear that Jesus sometimes preaches law? Why do Jesus' words at times contradict other scriptures in the New Testament?

Here are some common scriptures that can cause confusion when interpreted wrongly:

### On Forgiveness

Jesus says in *Matthew 6:14-15* *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

But Paul says in *Ephesians 4:32* *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

### On Salvation and Eternal Life

When asked about inheriting eternal life this is recorded: *Mark 10:17-21* *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* <sup>18</sup> *"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother."* <sup>20</sup> *"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."* <sup>21</sup> *Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

Also this: *Luke 10:25-28* *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* <sup>26</sup> *"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"* <sup>27</sup> *He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* <sup>28</sup> *"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

But in *Acts 16* the same question is asked and this is how it's answered: *Acts 16:27-31* *When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

### On Judgment

*Matthew 25:34-36, 41-43* *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'... "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

Jesus speaks here of an end-time judgment that is based upon if people did good works 'fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and looked after the sick...' while these are all good things (and should be the fruit of salvation), nothing is mentioned about faith or salvation in Christ.

*Matthew 23:35-39* *And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth... <sup>36</sup> Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation. <sup>37</sup> "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. <sup>38</sup> Look, your house is left to you desolate. <sup>39</sup> For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'*

## On Keeping the Law

Matthew 23:1-3 *"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.'"*

Mark 12:28-31 *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"<sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.<sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'<sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>32</sup> There is no commandment greater than these."*

Matthew 5:21-19 *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."*

## Jesus Preaches 'Hyper Law'

Matthew 5:21-22 *You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.*

Matthew 5:27-28 *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Matthew 5:48 *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

## The Big Question

In teaching this, the obvious question that people are going to ask is, "if this is true, then doesn't that mean the words of Jesus have no value to us at all?" And of course the answer is: the words of Jesus definitely have value and meaning to us. (Is the Christmas story of no value to us because that has been 'fulfilled??)

And here are several ways why:

1. Jesus' words have value because they help us to **understand God's plan of redemption**. Jesus' words were ultimately bringing the Jews to the New Covenant of grace by in essence teaching them that they cannot keep the law, and the gospel would be preached to them and give them an opportunity to come to Jesus by faith.
2. While Jesus did preach the law to those under the law, what he was really doing was **showing the Jews the true Spirit of the law**, not the rules and rituals of the pharisees. So when Jesus teaches the sermon on the mount, he's showing Israel what 'true righteousness' looks like from the Spirit of the law. And although we are under grace, the Holy Spirit will lead us to live according to the same spirit of righteousness as presented in the law.
3. In the midst of audience-specific teaching, Jesus also gives **universal truths** that can be applied to everyone of every age. Many times we have to look at the principles within the words of Jesus. Take the example of Jesus saying 'if you do not forgive others, then God will not forgive you'. Well, we saw the New Covenant truth was that 'we should forgive because we've been forgiven'... but if you notice in both of these scriptures, the importance of forgiveness is highlighted. So the spiritual principle behind Jesus and Paul's word is that God wants us to forgive others.
4. They have value because they are Jesus' words, and because Jesus' words are so important, we should **take them very seriously**. Taking Jesus' words very seriously means we would be wise to take our time to really set the context of Jesus' words so that we will not misread and misinterpret them. Jesus' words are important, so we need to get them right!