

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 12 - Gospel Themes, Intro to Act

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You know, if you've ever opened up a Bible, you might have noticed something kind of strange. The most important story in it, the life of Jesus, is told four different times, right in a row. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And you might think, isn't that a little repetitive? Well, it turns out this wasn't an accident or some kind of copy-paste error. It was a brilliant, deliberate choice and unlocks a much, much richer picture of who Jesus was. So let's get into it.

All right, so let's just tackle the big question head-on. Why four? Why four? Why not just one single, clear, streamlined biography of Jesus? It seems like it would be simpler, right? Well, this isn't a new question. In fact, pretty soon after Jesus's life, the early church had to figure out what to do with these different accounts.

And the choice they made literally shaped history. And believe it or not, about a hundred years after the fact, a writer named Tatian had the exact same idea. He thought, hey, let's just merge them all.

He wove them all together into one single flowing story called the Diocese. But here's the really fascinating part. The early church, the people who were closest to the original events, they looked at his unified version, and they said, no, thanks.

They rejected it. They chose to keep the four separate voices. And that tells you there's something incredibly valuable about keeping them distinct.

Okay, so here's probably the best way to think about this. Imagine you're walking into an art gallery and in this gallery, four different artists were asked to paint a portrait of the very same person. Now they're all painting the same subject, of course, but each one is going to use their own style, their own colors, their own angle to highlight something different about that person's character.

Well, that is exactly what the Gospels are. They're four unique but complementary portraits of Jesus. So let's have a quick look at the gallery display before we walk through.

Matthew's portrait shows Jesus as the promised King, the new Moses. Mark gives us this powerful but suffering servant. Luke paints a picture of a savior for all people, especially the outcasts.

And then John, he gives us this deep theological look at Jesus as the divine word of God. Each one is true, and you really need all four to get the complete picture. All right, first up is Matthew's portrait.

This gospel is just soaked in Jewish scripture. It's written to show that Jesus is the one they've been waiting for, the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament was pointing to.

He's presented as this new Moses who delivers a new teaching from a mountain, and he's the rightful heir to King David's throne.

But here's the twist in Matthew's telling. This Jewish king has come to save everyone, both Jews and Gentiles alike. Mark's portrait is totally different.

It's fast. It's punchy. It's action-packed.

Jesus is constantly on the move, a figure of incredible authority and power. But Mark pairs that power with this really profound theme. Jesus is the suffering servant that the prophets talked about.

He didn't come to be served, but to serve and ultimately to suffer and die for his people. It's this amazing tension between his divine power and his very real humanity. Now we get to Luke's gallery, and his portrait just zooms out, expanding the frame.

Luke loves to use the word Savior, and he shows a Jesus who has this radical, boundary-breaking compassion for the outcasts of society—the poor, the sick, women, non-Jews, you know, the people on the fringes, the ones that everybody else overlooked. Luke paints a picture of a Savior whose arms are open to absolutely everyone. And finally, we come to John's portrait.

And wow, John's is on another level. It's the most openly theological. He uses these incredible titles for Jesus, like the Logos, or the Word of God, which is like saying he's the very self-expression of God in the flesh.

He calls him the Passover Lamb, whose sacrifice saves everyone. While all the Gospels point to Jesus being divine, John just puts a giant spotlight on it, showing us clearly that Jesus is God himself. So, okay, we have these four stunning, distinct portraits.

But what happens when we step back from looking at them individually and view them all together as a collection? Well, the combined picture does something really remarkable. It starts to challenge some of our most common—and frankly, incomplete—ideas about who Jesus was. It forces us to move beyond a simple, one-dimensional, haloed figure.

You see, one of the earliest challenges was this idea that, well, maybe Jesus wasn't really human. This belief got a name—Docetism. It comes from a Greek word that means to seem or to appear.

Basically, Docetists believed Jesus was God, for sure, but that he was kind of like a phantom—a divine being who only looked like he was human. Almost like he was wearing a human costume. Now, you might be thinking, okay, that's a weird, ancient idea.

But what's wild is how this way of thinking still creeps into our culture today, sometimes without us even noticing. Just think about that classic Christmas carol, *Away in a Manger*. We all sing that line: the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

But wait a minute. Why wouldn't a real, human baby cry? That's what babies do. It's a subtle, modern version of Docetism, picturing a Jesus who didn't fully experience what it means to be human.

And this brings us to a really important question. Does that popular image of a quiet, glowing, almost non-human Jesus actually match the portraits that the four gospel writers painted for us? Well, when you look closely at what they wrote, a very, very different picture comes into focus. The gospels actually go out of their way to show us a fully, completely human Jesus.

I mean, Luke tells us that he grew in wisdom and stature. He had to learn and develop just like any kid. At one point, Jesus himself admits he doesn't know the exact time of his own return.

And in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays in what Luke describes as absolute horror of his coming death. This isn't an illusion. This is real, raw humanity.

So the four portraits together correct this idea of a not-quite-human Jesus. But they also push back against another modern tendency: this idea of seeing Jesus as just a figure for my own personal, individual salvation. The gospels show that Jesus wasn't just saving individuals one by one.

He was building something much bigger. He was creating a whole new community. And the foundation for this brand new community, it all kicks off with one very specific, very symbolic number.

Twelve. So why twelve? Was it just a random number he liked? Absolutely not. This was a powerful, direct symbol.

By choosing twelve disciples, Jesus was intentionally echoing the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. He was making a huge statement, signaling that he was starting a new people of God, a restored Israel, with himself right at the center. This wasn't just some teaching group.

It was the beginning of a worldwide movement. And this new community completely flipped the script on what it meant to belong to God's people. In the old community, on the left there, it was defined by things like following the law of Moses, offering sacrifices at the temple, and being ethnically Jewish.

But Jesus created a new community, on the right, that was based on something totally different. Faith in him, obedience to his teachings, and it was radically open to people from all nations. Okay, so if the four gospels are about Jesus laying the foundation for this new community, what happens next? The story can't just end there, right? Well, it doesn't.

In fact, the gospel of Luke actually has a direct sequel that shows us what happens when this new community gets unleashed on the world. And that sequel is the book of Acts. You can really think of it as Luke volume 2. It picks up right where the gospels leave off and shows how the mission Jesus started is now carried forward by his followers, empowered by his spirit.

It's the incredible story of how this small group of people started a movement that would, no exaggeration, change the course of human history. And right at the very beginning of Acts, Jesus gives this new community its mission statement. This one sentence is basically the table of contents for the entire rest of the book.

It's the blueprint for how this whole thing is going to spread. And it's just a brilliant strategy, really. The mission is going to unfold in these three expanding, concentric circles.

It starts right there at the center, in Jerusalem. Then it moves out to the surrounding region of Judea and Samaria. And from there, its final destination is to the very ends of the earth.

But here's the coolest part. This plan wasn't just some great missionary strategy Jesus thought up on the spot. It was actually the fulfillment of something much, much older.

And this is the mic drop moment. This whole mission in the book of Acts, it isn't a new idea. It's the fulfillment of an ancient script written centuries earlier.

Just look at the parallels here. What Jesus tells us followers to do is a direct echo of prophecies from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah promised a day when God's spirit would be poured out, when his people would be his witnesses, and when his salvation would reach the ends of the earth.

Jesus is saying, okay, that time is now. And you, you're the ones who are going to do it. So we circle all the way back to the beginning.

Why four gospels? Because one portrait, one angle, could never capture the full reality of Jesus. Together, they give us this rich, multidimensional, almost 3D view of him as our king, our servant, our savior, and our God. They show us his complete humanity and his complete divinity.

And they tell us not just about who he was, but about the new kind of world he came to create and the mission he set in motion. So the real question isn't why there are four, but rather, when we stand back and look at all four portraits together, what incredible, breathtaking new details emerge from the masterpiece.