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Matthew Introduction (Part 1)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg introduces the study of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, acknowledging that the church today does not always agree with his message. He asserts that being a Christian means following Jesus and committing to obey and follow his example. Gregg notes that the historical study of the Bible and the four documents written by people who knew Jesus, including Luke who was not an eyewitness, offer a good source of documentation for this purpose. He plans to explore the Gospel of Matthew in detail, verse by verse.

Transcript

Today we're going to begin a study in the most important topic that a human being can make a study of, and that is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This study will take us through the Gospels found in the Scripture, and eventually, once we finish that, I intend, if possible, to go through the entire New Testament with you, if you're still around. It's going to take us a while, though.

We're going to spend a lot of time looking at the Gospels and learning as much as we can about this man, Jesus. Now, I said we're going to take a lot of time, and we live in a time where we're very busy, and time needs to be justified, as spent on any particular project. And you may wonder, well, why should I bother to take the time to study the life of Jesus? And I'm ready to answer that question, and I can't even give you a full answer, because there may be many reasons beyond that which I know, but a few things come to mind immediately as reasons why you should consider it an important study, and why you should be willing to devote a certain amount of time and energy to knowing more about this man, Jesus.

And that means whether you are a Christian that is a follower of Jesus or not. First of all, there is a historical reason. If we don't know very much about history, we are greatly impoverished in our understanding of our own times.

And, of course, you have a phenomenon in the world called the church. Now, the church is a very significant phenomenon. In many cases, it has practically ruled the Western

world.

It does not necessarily do so now, but it is still a very influential phenomenon in the world in which we live. And that being so, you would do well to know something about it, even if you are not sympathetic toward it, even if you are not part of the church and wish it never existed. Yet, for historical reasons, there is value in knowing what the church is, where it came from, and what its mission is.

Even if you are not sympathetic with the mission, if you are an antagonist toward the church, I would think that you would be interested in knowing what the mission is of this powerful entity that has so shaped civilization for the past 2,000 years. I mean, human civilization that is recordable only goes back a little more than 5,000 years. And for almost half of that time, there has been this entity called the church that has been asserting a great deal of influence.

And in order to know where the church came from, and how it started, and what it's about, one has to go back to an investigation of its founder. Now, one thing that's very interesting, as you study the life of Christ, you'll find that the church as we have come to know it in our own time may not resemble very much what the founder had in mind. It may be that many of the things that you object to in the religion of Christianity today don't even agree with what the founder, Jesus Christ, taught.

And you might find yourself much more attracted to him than you are to those who call themselves his followers. But the point is, there is a reality, a present reality, and a historical reality of the church that needs to be reckoned with. And the study of the life of Jesus Christ is where you've got to go if you really want to understand this phenomenon in history.

Now, some people don't care much about history in general. But you cannot live knowledgeably in your own times without knowing something about history. And I dare say that there is no historical subject that is more important to know about or more significant, or no person that has changed history so much as has this individual, Jesus of Nazareth, whose life we intend to study here.

So that is one reason you may wish to study with us and take the time to know more about Jesus. And that is what we could call a historical reason, an interest in history merely. There's another reason, however, and this would also apply to persons who are not necessarily committed to Christianity.

And that is what we could call the cultural reason. Not only has Christianity been a significant feature of history, it has been a potent influence upon the culture of all of the Western world, and of course through the missionary efforts of Christians into all parts of the world. And wherever Christianity goes, it has a tremendous influence on culture, on ethics, on values, on beliefs, on institutions, the institution of marriage, on government,

and so forth.

And this is all part of what makes a culture. If you are not even a sympathetic person toward Christianity, but you wonder how it is that our culture came to be the way it is, you will find, if you study with us the life of Jesus, that much of what the Western culture has taken for granted to be true, and has ordered its laws and its customs and its values upon, have their origin in Jesus Christ, in Jesus of Nazareth, this historical character. And therefore, whether you're interested in history or in culture or both, you may find it very valuable to study with us this life of Jesus.

There's another reason, and of course this would be a reason more of interest to a person who has a theological bent. We could call it a theological reason. And that is the person who wants to know about God.

Now, you might not want to know about God and still be interested in history and culture enough to be interested in studying the source of Christianity, which is Jesus himself. But if you are interested in more than simply history and in culture, if you're interested in ultimate things, if you're interested in knowing who made you and what kind of a being he is, and what he requires of you, and those kinds of theological questions, then of course Christianity is the place to look, you know, at least one place to look. I realize that some of you are not committed to Christianity and therefore may be interested in checking out other religions.

Well, do so with my blessing. But eventually, you cannot consider that you have studied the issue of God thoroughly until you have studied thoroughly the man Jesus Christ. Not only because he's one of the major people who has told us anything about God that has had any influence on human thinking over the past 2,000 years, but because he claimed that he was sent directly from God as God's mouthpiece.

He claimed to be the Son of God. In some obscure ways, he actually even seemed to claim that he was God himself come down in a human form to reveal himself. Jesus said, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father, which was the way he spoke of God.

So, if you want to know about God, if you have an interest in theological knowledge, theological just means knowledge of God, then the study of the life of Jesus is a very important thing. And theology is never studied adequately if Jesus and his teaching have been omitted from one's investigation. Now, there's a fourth reason, and this reason would really only appeal to people who are Christians.

But there are many of you out there listening who are Christians, and this, I think, would be probably the main reason why Christians should be interested in studying the life of Jesus. And that is that what Jesus said and what Jesus did set the norms for Christian discipleship. Now, the word discipleship simply means being a student or a follower.

And a disciple of Jesus is one who's a student and a follower of Jesus. Now, there are some of you out there who might call yourselves Christians, and yet not feel you're interested in this subject of discipleship very much. But it should be acknowledged that the word Christian, when used in the Bible, is used interchangeably with the word disciple.

That is to say, there is not a difference between being a disciple and being a Christian. In Acts chapter 11 and verse 26, it says, The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. And so, the definition of the word Christian really is tied up with this definition of what is a disciple.

Christian was just another word for a disciple. And therefore, whatever discipleship is, is what Christianity is. Now, Jesus said this in one place in John 8, 31.

He said, If you continue in my words, then you are my disciples indeed. Now, the attachment of that last word, indeed, makes it very clear that there might be people who seem to be disciples, but they are not indeed disciples. They're not genuine disciples.

And Jesus said elsewhere in Matthew chapter 7, that many on the day of judgment will say to him, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many works in your name? And he says, I will profess to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you wicked, you workers of iniquity. Now, that is an interesting thing, because here we have people who apparently regard themselves to be Christians.

They call him Lord. And on the day of judgment, they protest that in his name, they've done many things that we would think of as Christian things to do. And yet, he says, they have not known him.

They have not really been his disciples. And that being so, we should be very cautious about assuming that we are Christians and assuming that we are truly what Jesus said we must be in order to be right with God and be prepared to die and meet our maker and to be saved. A disciple is the one that has responded to Jesus Christ in the way that makes him a Christian.

Now, what is discipleship? As Jesus said, if you continue in my words, you are my disciples indeed, John 8, 31. Likewise, when Jesus told the church or told his people to go out and to spread the gospel to every nation, the way he put it in Matthew 28, verses 19 through 20, he said, Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you, Matthew 28, verses 19 through 20. Now, Jesus said we're to make disciples.

And how do we do that? Among other things, we must teach them to observe all things

that he commanded. Now, this certainly gives us two very good personal and discipleship-oriented reasons to study the life and teachings of Christ. First, Jesus said you are a disciple if you continue in my words.

And secondly, you make disciples by teaching others to continue in his words or to observe whatsoever things he's commanded. And so we can see that just calling oneself a Christian or being attached to a church or professing to have had a conversion, those are not the things that really save a person. According to Jesus, one must do the will of the Father.

One must follow Jesus Christ. They must continue in his teachings. And we're also told to imitate him.

It says in 1 John chapter 2 and verse 6 that he that says he abides in Christ ought himself also to walk even as Jesus walked, which means that we not only are to follow his teachings but to follow his way of life, his walk. Now, that is a very excellent reason and motivation for Christians to study the life of Christ. And I suspect that there are many Christians who've never really seriously done so.

There are many Christians who are quite content to allow the church to, you know, be their connection with God, as it were. They may not have very much knowledge of who Jesus was or what he said. They may not be able to tell you the story of Jesus.

But they feel somehow that they are Christians because they've always been in a Christian home or they believe themselves to have been raised in a Christian society or because they go to a church or have been baptized when they were little or whatever or even when they were big. The point is that none of those things determine whether you are a Christian in the biblical sense of the word. The disciples were called Christians in the Scriptures.

And therefore, to be a Christian, one is to be a disciple. And to be a disciple, one must follow the ways and the teachings of Jesus. And those who do not do so may protest loudly that they are Christians and may be insulted if you would question that.

But on the Day of Judgment, it is Jesus, not us, whose definition of Christian is going to matter to us. You see, some people think of Christian almost as a synonym for being a nice person. And if you would say to some people that they're not a Christian, they would assume, even though they profess no faith in Christ at all, they would feel insulted that you said they weren't a Christian because they feel that that's another way of saying they're not civilized or they're not nice or they don't belong in Western civilization or something.

Many people think they're Christians because they were born in America. But, of course, none of those things are true. And it's not even true that you're a Christian if you've

been raised in the church.

A Christian is a person who has become a follower of Jesus Christ by a distinct decision to turn from a former way of life that was not following Christ to a commitment of obeying Him and following His example in all things for the rest of your life. That's what it really means to be a disciple. And for a Christian to know that he's a Christian, he must examine and see whether he is a disciple.

And therefore, to do that, we must read how Jesus lived and read what He taught to see whether, in fact, we are following Him, whether we are following His example and His teachings. You certainly cannot be a follower of Christ if you do not follow His example and His teachings. Now, of course, having talked about why we ought to study the life of Christ, there's another issue.

And that is whether the study or the attempt to know about Christ is going to be an exercise in futility or not. What I mean is this, that Jesus obviously lived His life and said these things that He said almost 2,000 years ago, approximately 2,000 years ago. And like many others who lived lives and said things that long ago, we weren't there to hear them.

We know only about them through what other people have said and written down that claim that He said and did. Now, that means, of course, that the study of the life of Christ is going to be to a large extent an historical study, a study of a historical character. And to study any historical character who's no longer around and who no one who is alive today has ever met personally during the time of His sojourn here on earth means that we must depend upon sources.

Now, not all sources are equally reliable in studying any historical question. You could be studying the life of Alexander the Great or of Attila the Hun, and some sources of information would be more true than others, even to this day. Biographies about certain famous individuals will not all hold equal weight.

There are the authorized biographies and the unauthorized biographies. And, of course, the fact that an unauthorized biography is unauthorized doesn't mean that it doesn't have the truth in it. But I'm saying that not all biographers, not all reporters, not all documents about history or about events or about people have equal value in giving you true information about them.

And this is true when we consider the life of Jesus as well. Jesus is an historical person, and there were many people who wrote about Him. We have, of course, in the Bible four documents written by people who wrote about Him.

One was by traditionally assigned to Matthew, who was one of the twelve apostles who lived with Jesus and heard Him say the things that are recorded there. Another is by a

man named Mark, who we do not know what his association with Jesus may have been. He apparently was a resident of Jerusalem and had had a chance to hear Jesus preach, although his claim to fame, really, in being able to write an authoritative document about Jesus is found in the fact that Mark was associated later with Peter.

And Peter was, of course, a very close associate with Jesus, and Mark wrote down the things that Peter said. This information we gather from an early writer from the late first century named Papias, who told us that Peter preached, of course, the story of Jesus, and Mark was his interpreter or wrote down what he said and translated it into Greek, probably. And so we have Matthew, who was actually an eyewitness of much of what was said and done in the life of Jesus.

Then we have Mark, who may have witnessed some of it himself, but, of course, his real source of information was Peter, who clearly was an eyewitness of much of that. Then you have Luke, who in no sense makes any claim to be an eyewitness, but Luke was closely associated with the men who were. Luke traveled for years with the apostle Paul, and though Paul was not an eyewitness of the events in the Gospels, he brushed with the apostles all the time.

Well, not all the time, but frequently. He had many brushings with Peter and James and John and even with Mark and Matthew and so forth, and therefore Luke, who traveled with Paul, had many occasions to hear from those who did see Jesus. In the opening of his Gospel, Luke mentions this, that he had opportunity to do the research and to acquire comprehensive knowledge of his subject.

So Luke doesn't claim he's writing a firsthand account. He claims that he has researched it with people who did have firsthand information, and as such that makes him a very good historical source as well. And then, of course, you have John, and there are some modern scholars who would like to dispute whether John is a reliable source or not.

But if the Gospel of John is indeed written by John the brother of James, who together were called the sons of Zebedee, who were among the twelve, then John is a very good, reliable, firsthand eyewitness. Now, it's interesting that the Gospel of John mentions that the writer was an eyewitness of these things. It says that in John chapter 19, and it says again near the end of John in the closing statements, that the author was an eyewitness of what he wrote.

This, of course, has been disputed by many modern scholars, but these scholars are not really objective, in my opinion. These scholars many times have their own ax to grind and their own reason to want to eliminate John as a witness. The fact of the matter is that the early church from the time of the apostles on recognized that this Gospel, the fourth Gospel, was written by the man John, the apostle John, and recognized that Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote the other three Gospels.

Now, if this is true, and we have no serious reason to dispute it or to doubt it, then we have really three eyewitness accounts and one well-researched account with eyewitnesses as the sources that the author consulted. And that is a very good documentation of any historical subject. Now, you might say, but these men were Christians, and therefore perhaps we should not trust what they said about Jesus as being historically accurate.

Maybe they were biased. Well, can we really say that any historians are totally unbiased? I mean, they have their own way of looking at things that is true, and it is obvious that the Gospel writers did believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and they believed that He rose from the dead. But the next question is, why did they believe that? Did they make up the stories because they fabricated the beliefs, or did they become believers in those things because they were there and they saw the things that they recorded? Certainly this second suggestion is equally, if not better, accepted as the reason that these men were Christians.

They were Christians because indeed they saw what they saw and believed in Him because of that. It is impossible, really, to come up with a rational explanation of Christian belief as it was passed down from the apostles. Or, you know, how did it originate among them? Where did they get this idea that Jesus rose from the dead if the story they told is not a true story? In other words, these were not men who were rabbis who were interested in talking about religious things.

These were men who were fishermen and tax collectors and physicians and things like that. And they were not the kind of men to start a religion. In fact, they weren't even particularly religious men, it would appear, before they became Christians.

But they saw something. They witnessed something that was striking to them, that amazed them, that convinced them. And they became believers that this Jesus whom they saw and whom they heard was indeed more than an ordinary man.

Now, these men were largely Jews. Luke was probably a Greek, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke were Jewish men. And as Jews, they would not have any previous inclination to accept the suggestion that a man could be God, because the Jews were very stringent in their belief that there's only one God, and He's an invisible God, and man is not God, and so forth.

And for them to eventually come up with the idea that Jesus was God in the flesh would go right against their Jewish conditioning. And I guess we could ask the question, if they did come to believe this, as they apparently did, what convinced them? What convinced them to throw over their older way of thinking? Well, I think they tell us what convinced them. In their Gospels, they record what Jesus said and did.

He did miracles. He raised the dead. He healed people.

He walked on water. He commanded the storm, and it obeyed Him. And most importantly, at the end of His life, after He'd been crucified, He rose from the dead.

And this was what convinced them more than any other thing, I believe. Well, we've about run out of time for today's talk, but we will be continuing this on a daily basis, and we will soon get into the Gospel of Matthew and start going verse by verse through. I hope you'll be able to join us and be with us on a regular basis as we study this life of Jesus Christ, who said He was the Son of God and whom we believe was, and thus we have great value to derive from studying His life.