

Discovering the Real Jesus (part 3 of 6): Textual Comparisons (I)

Description: How to get to get to the Kingdom of God; some differences between the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew.

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Using Matthew as a case in point, we notice that the writers who came after Mark repeatedly changed the story line, in the following ways:

- 1) They often inserted the title "Son of God" for Jesus.
- 2) They often inserted the title "Father" for God.
- 3) They magnified the miracles of Jesus.
- 4) They covered up the limitations of Jesus.
- 5) They called Jesus "Lord".
- 6) They represented people praying to Jesus.
- 7) They portrayed Jesus with more knowledge.
- 8) They blurred the distinction between Jesus and God.

To illustrate the type of changes that occurred, I will show how individual episodes in the gospels of Matthew and Mark are similar and yet significantly different. The differences have been noted by Biblical scholars and explained as modifications introduced by Matthew.

The Greatest Commandment (Mark 12: 28-35, Matthew 22:34-40)

Mark 12: 28- 35	Matthew 22:34-40
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<p>²⁸One 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?"</p> <p>²⁹"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."</p> <p>³²"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."</p> <p>³⁴When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.</p>	<p>³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:</p> <p>³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."</p>
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* All quotes are from The New International Version.

In Mark's gospel, a teacher of the law asks Jesus as to what is the greatest commandment. Jesus replied that the greatest commandment was that God is one. Hearing Jesus' response, the man agrees with Jesus, that to believe that God is One is the greatest commandment. Jesus realizes that the man had answered wisely and tells him that he is not far from the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew, loving God becomes the greatest commandment and no mention of God being one is made.

The Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10: 17-19, Matthew 19: 16-20)

Mark 10: 17-19	Matthew 19: 16-20
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<p>¹⁷As 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?"</p> <p>¹⁸"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good except God alone." ¹⁹You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother."</p>	<p>¹⁶Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"</p> <p>¹⁷"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."</p> <p>¹⁸"Which ones?" the man inquired.</p> <p>Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."</p>
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Hearing the two together, you do not detect any difference and this is what happens. By the time you finish reading Matthew, then Mark and then Luke. One does not remember what he read in which gospel. The reader thinks that all three gospels say exactly the same thing. Yet, when we study them together closely, we realize that the gospel writers were able to use the information to their advantage, to teach the precise point they wanted to preach.

In the above passage, the opening exchange between the man and Jesus has been altered by Matthew. In Mark, the man addresses Jesus as "good teacher". Jesus replies with a mild rebuke, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Once again, Matthew tries to change the passage. First he alters the man's initial question by moving the word "good" from the address and putting it as the object of the sentence.

Mark: "Good teacher, what must I do...?"

Matthew: "Teacher, what good deed must I do...?"

Finally, embarrassed by the fact that Jesus had reprimanded the man for calling him good, Matthew changes Mark's second sentence, hence leaving Jesus no chance to refuse that address and protecting him from the implicit suggestion that he was not good. Yet in doing so, Matthew has made his version lack coherency, indicating as though Jesus did not understand the question.

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