

Is There A Fifth Gospel?

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series on “Lost Books of the Bible” by sampling the Gospel of Thomas.

1. Warm-up Question: For centuries, theologians knew there was once something called “The Gospel of Thomas,” but it had been lost in antiquity. Then in 1945, two Egyptian farmers accidentally unearthed a jar containing 13 leather bound books, one of which contained the complete manuscript of Thomas! It was a stunning discovery. When in your life have you discovered something (large or small) that was once lost?

2. There’s a reason why the Gospel of Thomas didn’t make it into the Bible. It tells no stories about Jesus. It’s just a list of 114 disconnected sayings that are attributed to Jesus. Half those sayings have parallels in the Biblical Gospels; the other half are unique to Thomas. The full text of Thomas found in 1945 carbon dates to 340 A.D. Since then small fragments of earlier versions of Thomas have been found. By comparing those fragments, scholars have determined that the text of Thomas evolved over time, becoming less and less like the original sayings of Jesus and more and more Gnostic. In other words, the Gospel of Thomas appears to represent a creative blending of authentic Jesus statements with Gnostic concepts not espoused by Jesus. We sampled Thomas on Sunday because: (a) as informed Christians we should be aware of it, including why it didn’t make it into the Bible; and (b) some of the statements in Thomas connect to points Jesus made in the Biblical Gospels and can challenge us to think more deeply about those points.
 - a. Some statements in Thomas are pretty odd, making it obvious why Thomas didn’t gain wide enough circulation to be included in the Bible. Here are two examples. Any ideas what these statements might mean?

Thomas 7:1. “Blessed is the lion that a person will eat and the lion will become human.”

Thomas 37:1. “His disciples said, ‘When will you appear to us, and when will we see you?’ Jesus said, ‘When you undress without being ashamed and take your clothes (and) put them under your feet like little children (and) trample on them.’”
 - b. Other statements in Thomas are far more closely connected to what Jesus says in the Bible and challenge us to think more deeply about core teachings of Jesus. We’ll look at three examples below.

3. In the Bible Jesus repeatedly invites us to make a conscious decision to enter “the kingdom of God.” That phrase means “life in God” or “life the way God meant it to

- be.” In the Bible, Jesus also repeatedly teaches us to see ourselves as beloved children of God, going so far as to dare us to call God “Abba,” which means “Daddy” or “Papa.” Thomas weaves those two teachings together in an insightful way. Read Thomas 3:1-5 (text on p. 3).
- a. Thomas seems to be saying that you cannot enter the kingdom of God until you accept that you are a beloved child of God. Do you agree? Why is it difficult (or impossible) to experience life the way God intended if we don’t see ourselves as a beloved child of God?
 - b. By Thomas’ definition, have you made it into the kingdom of God? In other words, in your heart of hearts, do you personally feel like a beloved child of God? Why or why not?
 - c. Jeff pointed out that we often carry around powerful subconscious thoughts about ourselves that make it hard for us to see ourselves as beloved children of God. Jeff shared the story of a friend who implicitly saw herself as Cursed, rather than Beloved. What negative thoughts threaten to hinder with your ability to fully embrace your status as a beloved child of God? What can we do to root out these negative thoughts? What happens if we don’t? (Hint: Look back at Thomas 3:5.)
4. Read Thomas 8:1-4. As children of God, we are called to focus on what matters most, i.e., the big fish. As you ponder this parable, what are some of the little fish that Jesus is calling you to throw back into the water?
5. To help us think more deeply about what the “big fish” represents, let’s read Thomas 18:1-3.
- a. In verse 2, Jesus says, “Where the beginning is, there will the end be too.” Jeff compared that to an old wise saying that used to hang in frontier school houses, “What you will be, you are now becoming.” What do you think that frontier saying means? Do you believe it’s true? Is it a fair interpretation of verse 2?
 - b. Jeff interpreted Thomas 18:1-3 to mean: What matters most is what you do with the moment right in front of you right now. Live like a child of God in that moment, and little by little, moment by moment, you will become the person you were destined to be.
 - i. Are you someone who lives mindfully in the moment? How much energy do you expend worrying about the past or future?
 - ii. Why is it so hard to live mindfully in the moment? What are some ways we can get better at living in the moment?

- iii. The way we live each moment should be dramatically impacted by our identity as children of God. The essence of discipleship, Jeff said, is to ask ourselves, “How should a child of God respond in this moment?”, then practice responding accordingly in that moment. Think about a situation (large or small) you will face tomorrow. Describe the situation, then share what you feel it would look like for you to respond to that situation as a child of God.

Excerpts From the Gospel of Thomas

Chapter 3

- (1) Jesus says, “If those who lead you say to you: ‘Look, the kingdom is in the sky!’ then the birds of the sky will precede you.
- (2) If they say to you: ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fishes will precede you.
- (3) Rather, the kingdom is inside of you and outside of you.
- (4) When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the children of the living Father.
- (5) But if you do not come to know yourselves, then you exist in poverty, and you are poverty.”

Chapter 8

- (1) And Jesus says: “The human being is like a sensible fisherman who cast a net into the sea and drew it up from the sea filled with little fish.
- (2) Among them the sensible fisherman found a large, fine fish.
- (3) He threw all the little fish back into the sea, (and) he chose the large fish effortlessly.
- (4) Whoever has ears to hear should hear.”

Chapter 18

- (1) The disciples said to Jesus: “Tell us how our end will be.”
- (2) Jesus said: “Have you already discovered the beginning that you are now asking about the end? For where the beginning is, there the end will be too.
- (3) Blessed is the one who will stand at the beginning. And he will know the end, and he will not taste death.”