

storytelling for a particular purpose, and the purpose of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is thoroughly Christ-centered!

This brings us to the two primary purposes that the writers had in mind when writing their Gospels. (1) They have selected and arranged material to tell the story of Jesus. (2) Through the story of Jesus, they are saying something important to their first readers (and to us). Since the Holy Spirit saw fit to inspire the Gospels in this way, we need to adopt a way of reading them that matches the method used by the Gospel writers.

How Should We Read the Gospels?

Our method of reading the Gospels must respect the means God used to inspire them in the first place. The Gospel writers are saying something about Jesus in each episode and they are saying something *by the way* they link the smaller stories together to form the larger story.

To arrive at a method of reading the Gospels that matches the means of God's communication, let's transform these two central purposes cited above into two simple interpretive questions. (1) What does this small story tell us about Jesus? (2) What is the Gospel writer trying to say to his readers by the way that he puts the smaller stories together? The chart below depicts the two central interpretive questions for reading the Gospels.

Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3
What is this central message of this episode?	What is this central message of this episode?	What is this central message of this episode?
Episodes 1, 2, and 3		
What is the Gospel writer trying to communicate to his readers by the way he connects these stories together?		

Take the familiar story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 as an example. Step 1 is to read each episode and understand its main message (see below).

Luke 10:25–37	Luke 10:38–42	Luke 11:1–13
We see that love for one's neighbor should transcend all human boundaries such as nationality, race, religion, or economic status.	Here we discover that doing good things for God can sometimes cause us to miss God himself. Martha's desire to put on a feast for Jesus causes her to miss the best thing: listening to Jesus.	Jesus teaches us how to communicate with God through prayer (11:1–4). This is followed by a parable on prayer (11:5–8) and an exhortation to pray (11:9–13).

In Step 2 we need to put the episode of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 alongside the surrounding episodes to see what Luke is trying to communicate by the way he has put the smaller stories together. Look at our summaries above and think about what these three stories have in common. Do you see any connections? Here is what we came up with.

Luke 10:25–37; 10:38–42; 11:1–13
The common theme seems to be relationships. In the first story we are told that followers of Jesus should be loving neighbors to people in need. In our second story we are taught that listening to Jesus should take priority over "religious activity." Finally Luke emphasizes our relationship to God in 11:1–13. Followers of Jesus need to know how to relate to their neighbors (service), how to relate to the Lord Jesus (devotion), and how to relate to their Father (prayer).

Special Literary Forms in the Gospels

As a teacher Jesus would never have been accused of being boring. One reason he was such an engaging teacher was that he conveyed his message through a wide array of literary forms and techniques.²⁰ We cannot discuss them all, but we want to give you some guidelines for understanding Jesus' use of exaggeration, metaphor and simile, irony, rhetorical questions, and parables.