

Still Teaching After Two Millennia

What Can We Learn From the Master Teacher?

As a teacher, he has been called “outstanding” and “exemplary.” Others have questioned his effectiveness, and some have said he was a bad teacher. Yet, amazingly, he is still teaching 2,000 years later. Can contemporary teachers learn anything from this controversial teacher? Well, let me share with you some of the skills that he has taught me. They have revolutionized my teaching.

As you probably guessed, I am talking about Jesus. Several of His students said He taught “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (see Matthew 7:29, KJV and parallels). Since His contemporaries did not have tape recorders, camcorders, or electronic notebooks, how did the Gospel writers produce such vivid recollections of

His lectures some 20 to 30 years after He had departed the classroom? And further, what made Jesus’ teachings so memorable that they have withstood the test of time—as effective and relevant today as in A.D. 30?

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By Bertram L. Melbourne

These questions have intrigued me for some time. My study has given me a greater admiration for Jesus and provided valuable insights from His teaching techniques.

Now, what did it mean that Jesus taught with authority and not as the scribes? How did the rabbis teach? One commentator says they constantly quoted past scribal authorities. In comparison to the rabbis, even the greatest of them, Jesus taught in His own name.¹ Shogren concurs, “Scribal authority arose from the learned interpretation of Torah and the citation of earlier rabbis.”² Ellen White adds, “The teaching of the scribes and elders was cold and formal, like a lesson learned by rote. . . . The rabbis spoke with doubt and hesitancy, as if the Scriptures might be interpreted to mean one thing or exactly the opposite.”³

Jesus exhibited four types of authority that are instructive:

1. *Sapiential authority*, or authority deriving from knowledge. He knew the Scriptures well. We see Him quoting the Old Testament at 12 years of age when He talked with the temple elders, when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, in the synagogue at Nazareth when He expounded to His neighbors about His calling; when He explained the new birth to Nicodemus, when He interacted with the scribes and Pharisees (many times), when He challenged the money changers in the temple, and when He walked with the men on the way to Emmaus after His resurrection.

Jesus was also well acquainted with nature. Ellen White writes: “The Saviour’s life on earth was a life of communion with nature and with God. In this communion He revealed for us the secret of a life of power. . . . He found recreation amidst the scenes of nature, gathering knowledge as He sought to understand nature’s mysteries. He studied the word of God, and His hours of greatest happiness were found when He could turn aside from the scenes of His

labors to go into the fields, to meditate in the quiet valleys, to hold communion with God on the mountainside or amid the trees of the forest.”³³

2. Jesus also taught with *moral authority*. No guile was found in His mouth. His life reveals the epitome of virtue and moral principles. John the Baptist recognized in Him “a purity of character that he had never before perceived in any man. The very atmosphere of His presence was holy and awe-inspiring.”³⁴ The beauty of His life enhanced the authority of His words. He lived what He taught to the extent that his disciples were so impressed they invited Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

3. Jesus had *personal authority*. There was a consistency between precept (His teachings) and example (His behavior). Ellen White says, “He exercised the greatest tact, and thoughtful, kind attention in His intercourse with the people. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul.”³⁵

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4. And finally, He had *charismatic authority*. People flocked to Jesus to hear His teaching.

Clearly, then, Jesus' knowledge and authoritative teaching, as well as His exemplary life, set Him apart from His contemporaries and their teaching practices. But are there other factors that made His teaching memorable and still effective 2,000 years later? If so, what are some of these factors?

Jesus' Use of Illustrations

Jesus used numerous illustrations to enliven His teaching, and to appeal to the various kinds of learners in His audience. His effective teaching strategies included parables, figures of speech, and other literary devices. Although parables were a common method of pedagogy at the time, Jesus employed them in unusual and memorable ways:

1. *Jesus turned conventional values upside down*, according to Robert Johnston, a religion professor at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.⁷ The rabbis told the parable of the 11th-hour workers to suggest that those who were called early to work for God had thus borne the brunt of the toil and the heat, and therefore would receive the greatest reward. Jesus used this same parable to demonstrate that longevity of service is not as crucial as response to God's call, coupled with quality, purposeful service. Consequently, all workers in God's vineyard receive the same pay.

2. *Jesus communicated the unknown by using the known*. By telling stories about everyday things such as wheat, millstones, coins, and leaven, Jesus used items with which people were familiar to teach deep spiritual truths about which they were unfamiliar.

So often in our classrooms and pulpits, we de-emphasize the known and concentrate on the unknown. As a result, we accentuate differences and downplay or ignore similarities. Too many times, teachers and preachers dismiss the spiritual beliefs of the people with whom they work, viewing them as wrong or pagan, rather than using these concepts to help their hearers understand the truths of the gospel. Jesus' teaching method has taught me that focusing on disagreements divides and polarizes people, while stressing commonalities tends to bring them together.

3. *Jesus used natural things to illustrate spiritual concepts*. For example, in speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus employed illustrations like water, wind, the womb, flesh, and spirit. As a teacher of the law, Nicodemus was doubtless familiar with these concepts. Jesus' intent appears in these words, "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not be-

lieve, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:11, 12, RSV). Jesus thus demonstrated the integration of faith and learning as well as the transfer of learning, two vital aspects of learning and spiritual growth. Too often, we compartmentalize life and learning and fail to achieve the transfer of learning that is so crucial for comprehension.

4. *Jesus used current events and everyday experiences to capture the attention of His audience*. Many scholars think that when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, the attack on the traveler had recently occurred. It must therefore have been very much on the minds of the people. This event offered the perfect illustration for the lesson He wanted to teach when the lawyer asked Him, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus captured this same immediacy in the parable of the 10 virgins and that of the sower. Imagine how dynamic our teaching and preaching would be if we followed the example of the Master Teacher!

5. *Jesus used His parables to awaken curiosity*. Human beings are curious and want to know the reason behind actions and happenings. We can use this God-given faculty to advantage in our teaching by modeling Jesus' methodology. As He awakened His listeners' curiosity, He inspired reflection, which led to comprehension and learning.

When Jesus told the parables of the sower, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, and the leaven, He piqued the disciples' interest. On several occasions, they asked Him to explain His parables. Our teaching and preaching would be revolutionized if we used Jesus' method of stimulating inquiry, then pressing home the truth by appealing to the heart.

Rhetorical Devices

Jesus used figures of speech and rhetorical devices in His instruction, which made His teaching creative, effective, and memorable. Some of these strategies included the following:

1. *Hyperbole*, or exaggeration for dramatic effect. We find examples in the story of the speck of dust in the brother's eye versus the plank in the speaker's eye (Matthew 7:3), and the camel's trying to go through the eye of a needle as illustrating a rich man trying to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:24).

2. *Pun*, a play on words, using terms that sound alike but have different meanings. Matthew 23:24 and the story of the guides who strained at a gnat but swallowed a camel is one example, in the Aramaic, of Jesus' use of a pun.

3. *Simile*, the comparison of like things. In the parables of Matthew 13, Jesus employed familiar objects, like leaven, mustard seed, and a drag net, to illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like and how its principles can be understood.

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4. *Metaphor*, a comparison between unlike things. Jesus used this device extensively in the Gospel of John, where the parables of the Synoptic Gospels are replaced by metaphors. He is described as the Bread of life, the Door, the Good Shepherd, etc.

5. *Paradox*, a statement that seems contradictory or absurd but which may actually be true. Examples of paradox in Jesus' teachings include the first being the last and servant of all (Mark 9:35); the truly great being the least (Luke 9:48b), and the goug-

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ing of the eye and amputating of the foot (Matthew 18:8, 9).

6. *Epigram*, a terse, witty, pointed, and often antithetical statement. An example is: "Whosoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whosoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12, NASB).

7. *Logical Arguments*⁸: (a) the *reductio ad absurdum* that aims to show that a statement cannot be sound, since it leads to an absurd conclusion. This appears in these statements of Jesus: "any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself, how then will his kingdom stand?" (Matthew 12:25, 26, NASB). (b) The *logical dilemma*, an argument that forces a choice between two conclusions, as in, "He who is

without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7, NASB). (c) The *argument ad fortiori*, which states that if something is true, then something else has even greater reason to be true. Jesus used this in statements like, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him" (Matthew 7:11, NASB).

Imagine the results if we emulated Jesus' use of these rhetorical devices in teaching and preaching! Imaginative thinking, reading, and preparation as well as the application of Jesus' teaching methodology will help us, too, to "teach with authority."

Jesus Taught Even in His Absence

A third reason why Jesus is still teaching 2,000 years after His departure is this: He was able to teach even when He was not physically present. Does this sound absurd? Let me illustrate by using two examples.

The first concerns Mary Magdalene. Jesus had to cast out the devils from her seven times until she learned to sit at His feet even when He was not there. Only then did she gain the victory. We see here the imagery of a pupil/teacher relationship, since in those days the student sat at the teacher's feet on a low stool or on the floor. The point is that Mary

gained the victory over her obsessions only after she began to apply the teachings of Jesus even when He was not physically present. Isn't that something we need to learn to do and to teach our students to do, as well?

The second example is even more explicit. Jesus' illustrations dealt with everyday items and experiences, so they continued to teach whenever people encountered the illustrations again. For example, each time Jesus' pupils saw a farmer sowing seeds, they remembered the parable of the sower, and His lesson was reinforced. When they saw a wedding procession, they remembered the parable of the 10 virgins, and Jesus would still be teaching, despite His absence. What if our teaching occurred even in our absence? What effect would this have on students?

I decided to try out this teaching technique. I incorpo-

rated familiar items into my class presentations to provide lessons for my students. One day, as I was about to start class, one of my students said: “Dr. Melbourne, guess what! I saw something that you talked about and I thought about what you said. I figured you would want to know.” She then proceeded to relate her encounter with

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the illustration I had used and reiterated what she had learned. By using Jesus’ methods, I, too, had successfully taught in my absence.

Imitating Jesus’ techniques has revolutionized my teaching. They have taught me to be more student-centered in my approach; to emphasize similarities rather than differences; to awaken inquiry in my students, and to use their curiosity to impart needed knowledge. I recommend that other teachers also apply the teaching techniques of Jesus in their classrooms. When teachers give these time-tested teaching techniques some thoughtful contemplation and reflective implementation, students will be intrigued and learning will be enhanced. ☞



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 137. Compare the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 360, which states that Christ did not teach “dogmatically, but on His own authority rather than by quoting earlier expositors of the law, as the rabbis did in their teaching.”
2. G. S. Shogren, “Authority and Power,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 52.
3. Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1940), p. 253.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
6. _____, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1951), p. 162.
7. Robert Johnston, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, Material from an unpublished paper.
8. Daniel Augsburg, *Life and Teachings Class Syllabus* (Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1977).