



# JESUS CHRIST

M A S T E R T E A C H E R

**W**hile Jesus was clearly an effective preacher and sought-after healer, He was also a master teacher.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Gospels, readers encounter a variety of teaching episodes—learning experiences created specifically for His 12 disciples, as well as for groups of thousands or a single individual.<sup>2</sup> His Sermon on the Mount, for example, was actually an outdoor teaching session in which both the disciples and a large group participated.<sup>3</sup>

## The Focus of His Teaching

Jesus oriented His teaching to actively engage His students

## His Focus, Strategies, and Results

in the learning experience. To do this, He focused on thinking, knowing, understanding, being, and doing.

*Thinking.* When teaching, Jesus would often ask His students, “What do you think?” In introducing the story of the good shepherd, for example, He extended an invitation to consider

carefully the meaning of the story.<sup>4</sup>

*Knowing.* For Christ, knowledge was important. When the Sadducees presented Him with the “impossible riddle” of the woman who consecutively married seven brothers, Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” Throughout His teaching, Jesus

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emphasized the importance of knowing the truth and of developing an experiential knowledge of God.<sup>5</sup>

**Understanding.** Knowledge cannot stand alone. Christ also viewed understanding as crucial. Telling the parable of a farmer planting his field, He stated, “The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it.” At the close of His ministry, after washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus asked them, “Do you understand what I have done for you?”<sup>6</sup>

**Being.** On one occasion, an expert in the law asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, and then redirected the lawyer’s question to a matter of being: “Which was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Jesus also spoke of the importance of exemplifying specific virtues in one’s life. “Be merciful,” He urged, “just as your Father is merciful.” “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” Or simply, “Be ready.”<sup>7</sup>

**Doing.** Christ highlighted the concept that knowledge should inform practice, that who one is should be evident in what he or she does. “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Furthermore, He taught that the actions of one’s life influence destiny. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Way Jesus Taught

Jesus Christ was “the best teacher the world has ever known.”<sup>9</sup> In His teaching, He used a variety of strategies, methods that promoted high-level thinking and helped His students to better understand and apply His instruction.<sup>10</sup>

**Illustrations.** Matthew, one of Christ’s disciples, observed that Jesus often used illustrations. Many of these included vivid imagery—picking grapes from thorn bushes, pouring new wine into old wineskins, a thief breaking unexpectedly into a house, and the blind leading the blind.<sup>11</sup> Jesus also used the concrete and familiar to teach about the abstract and perhaps unknown. “Watch out for false prophets,” He said. “They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” On one occasion, Jesus warned His disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. At first they thought He was speaking in literal terms, but then realized that He “was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”<sup>12</sup>

**Stories.** Jesus also told stories, of which some 40 are recorded. Their purpose was to make His lessons more easily remembered and to serve as the basis for future learning.<sup>13</sup> These stories were generally brief—on average, just seven verses in length. The longest, the story of the prodigal son, is only 22 verses, while four of the stories are told in a single verse. Jesus’ stories were not complex, with multiple meanings. Generally, He would focus on a key

point. In the story of the 10 virgins, for example, He concluded, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”<sup>14</sup>

Jesus did not teach about distant lands or exotic circumstances. Rather, He spoke about the ordinary things of life, such as losing money, getting a job, making bread, and getting married. Finally, the concepts He embedded in His stories were not trivial, but rather great truths, such as humility, prayer, the plan of salvation, and the eternal reward for faithfulness.

**News Items.** Jesus used current events as instructional material. When some of His listeners told Him about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed in the temple, Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Similarly, Jesus used what was apparently “just-off-the-press” news when He told about a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers.<sup>15</sup>

**Historical Events.** Jesus’ students were familiar with events in their nation’s history. Jesus used these incidents as the basis

for instruction. One Sabbath, as Jesus and His disciples were passing through a grain field, some of the disciples began to pick a few heads of grain. The Pharisees accused them of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?” Similarly, Jesus referred His listeners to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, as well as the martyr-

dom of the prophet Zechariah.<sup>16</sup>

**Analogies.** Frequently in His teaching, Jesus made use of similes and metaphors, often extending these into well-developed analogies. He compared His generation to children playing in the marketplaces and calling out to their companions: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.” He then went on to describe how many had similarly chosen to reject both the ministry of John the Baptist as too austere, and that of the Son of Man as overly accepting. On another occasion, Christ pointed out the hypocrisy and skin-deep religiosity of the scribes and Pharisees, likening them to “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones.” In similar ways, Christ used analogies of a fig tree in springtime and of a hen gathering her chicks.<sup>17</sup>

**Tangible Objects.** One day, a group of Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus and asked Him, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

“Bring me a denarius,” Jesus replied. When they brought the coin, He asked, “Whose portrait is this?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

### Jesus’ Teaching Strategies

- Illustrations
- Stories
- News Items
- Historical Events
- Analogies
- Tangible Objects
- Questions
- Analysis and Reasoning
- Problem Solving
- Comparison and Contrast
- Anomalies
- Emphasis Through Hyperbole
- Enacted Teaching
- Active Learning
- Collaborative Learning
- Repetition With Variety

“Give then to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Jesus stated, “and to God what is God’s.”

On other occasions, Jesus used a withered fig tree to illustrate the power of faith, ravens and lilies to exemplify quiet confidence in God, and bread and wine to represent His own sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

**Questions.** Even as a student, Jesus asked questions effectively.<sup>19</sup> As a teacher, He used questions for a variety of reasons:

- *To remember the known.* “Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?”<sup>20</sup>

- *To clarify concepts.* “Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day?”<sup>21</sup>

- *To correct erroneous ideas.* “Do you not say, ‘Four months

kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man.”<sup>27</sup>

**Problem solving.** “What do you think?” Jesus asked. “There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

In addition to story problems, Jesus used learning experiences as problem-solving assignments. After He had been teaching a group of thousands, His disciples came to Him late in the afternoon and said, “Master, send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.” Jesus replied, “You give them something to eat.”<sup>28</sup>

**Comparison and Contrast.** On various occasions, Christ led His students through comparison and contrast. The parable of the wise man and the foolish man is a prime example. There were aspects in common—building a house, receiving instruction, experiencing a storm. But there were distinguishing elements, as well—the foundation, the implementation of knowledge, and the final outcome. Christ also told the story of 10 virgins, all of whom

were waiting for the bridegroom and all of whom slept. Five, however, had taken extra oil. These entered the joy of the marriage celebration, while the other five virgins found themselves barred from the event.<sup>29</sup>

**Anomalies.** Christ wanted His students to grapple with conundrums and thereby engage in deep thinking. Here are some examples of paradoxes that He used for this purpose:

- “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”

- “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”

- “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

- “Among those born of woman there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”<sup>30</sup>

**Emphasis Through Hyperbole.** In Jesus’ time, many held the idea that poverty was God’s curse, while riches were evidence of His favor. In refuting this misconception, Jesus stated, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Pointing out the Pharisees’ myopic focus on trivia, He declared, “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Discussing the human tendency to find fault with others, Jesus talked about

**D**iscussing the human tendency to find fault with others, Jesus talked about removing the plank from one’s own eye before focusing on the speck in another’s eye. In each case, Jesus used hyperbole to underscore a concept and make it memorable.

more and then the harvest”? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”<sup>22</sup>

- *To guide thinking.* As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Of course not, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”<sup>23</sup>

- *To motivate personal thought.* Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”<sup>24</sup>

- *To affirm truth in the mind.* “Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught [Peter]. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’”<sup>25</sup>

- *To invite a faith response.* At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”<sup>26</sup>

**Analysis and Reasoning.** Jesus invited His listeners to engage in logical reasoning. When His opponents declared that He drove out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons, Jesus replied, “How can Satan drive out Satan? If a

removing the plank from one's own eye before focusing on the speck in another's eye. In each case, Jesus used *hyperbole* to underscore a concept and make it memorable.<sup>31</sup>

**Enacted Teaching.** In prison, John the Baptist wondered if Jesus was truly the Messiah. He sent his disciples to ask. Jesus did not immediately reply, but rather went about the activities of His ministry. At the end of the day, Jesus said to these disciples, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Perhaps the greatest example, however, of Christ's enacted teaching took place in the upper room. After the meal was over, Jesus arose from the table, wrapped a towel around His waist, and began to wash His disciples' feet.<sup>32</sup>

**Active Learning.** Jesus believed that it was important for His students to be actively involved in learning. When the tax collectors asked Peter if his teacher paid the temple tax, he said "Yes." But when Peter came into the house, Jesus asked, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."<sup>33</sup>

**Collaborative Learning.** One might conclude that with so many villages and towns to reach, and with such a brief period of ministry available, Christ would send His students to individually apply what they had learned. In commissioning the 12 disciples, however, Jesus sent them out two by two. In like manner, He sent out some 70 others. When His students returned from their collaborative field experiences, Jesus conducted a debriefing session, in which they "reported to Him all they had done and taught."<sup>34</sup>

**Repetition With Variety.** Jesus understood that crucial concepts are not learned through a single exposure. Repetition is needed. To enhance reinforcement, however, and to avoid monotony, Jesus incorporated variety. A critical construct in Christ's teaching, for example, was "the kingdom of heaven." On one occasion, He told His listeners, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you."<sup>35</sup> Then He proceeded to approach the concept from multiple perspectives. "The kingdom of heaven," He said, "is like . . ."

- A man who sowed good seed in his field,
- A mustard seed,
- Yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour,
- Treasure hidden in a field,
- A merchant looking for fine pearls, and
- A net that caught all kinds of fish.<sup>36</sup>

## Christ spoke of great rejoicing in heaven over a single sinner who repents, of experiencing fullness of joy, and of living life to the full.

### The One Who Taught

The strategies Christ employed were key elements in His teaching. Equally significant, however, was the persona of the One who taught.<sup>37</sup>

**Context of Joy.** Jesus intentionally created a learning climate of joy. The scribes noted, for example, that John the Baptist's disciples often fasted and prayed, while Christ's disciples did not. Jesus replied that it is appropriate for the guests at a wedding to celebrate when the bridegroom is with them. In His teaching, Christ spoke of great rejoicing in heaven over a single sinner who repents, of experiencing fullness of joy, and of living life to the full.<sup>38</sup>

**Invitation to Success.** When Jesus called Peter and his brother Andrew to join His ministry, He did not initially invite them to become public speakers or church leaders. Rather, because they were fishermen, He said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Instead of concentrating on what His students could not do, Jesus chose to focus on their success.<sup>39</sup>

**Tenderness and Sympathy.** As a teacher, Christ was caring and compassionate. The following are but a few examples of His tenderness and sympathy:

• When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

• The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then He said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

• When they saw Him walking on the lake, they thought He was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw Him and were terrified. Immediately He spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

• Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

• When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" He asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!"<sup>40</sup>

**Humility.** Christ's actions as a servant, washing His disciples' feet, are a powerful testimony to His humble spirit. This was not, however, an isolated incident. When Jesus became aware, for example, that the Pharisees believed that His disciples had baptized more followers than John the Baptist, He did not cite the fulfillment of John's words, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Rather, Jesus quietly left the setting of His overwhelming popularity, and departed again to Galilee.<sup>41</sup>

**Conscious of Context.** Jesus was perceptive about His surroundings, and that awareness guided His teaching. Once, Jesus and the disciples were traveling to Capernaum. When they arrived, Jesus asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” The disciples kept quiet because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus reminded them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

Jesus was also sensitive to the “absorption level” of His learners. Mark indicates that Christ taught only as much as His learners could understand, while John records that near the end of His ministry, Christ told His disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Each of these incidents is an indicator that Christ was observant of His context and attuned to the needs of His students.<sup>42</sup>

**Personal Association.** Jesus was accessible and personable. Shortly after Christ’s baptism, John the Baptist pointed to Christ and identified Him as the Lamb of God. Two of John’s disciples heard the pronouncement and decided to become Christ’s followers. Turning around, Jesus saw them following Him and asked, “What do you want?” They replied, “Teacher, where are you staying?” “Come,” Jesus said, “and you will see.” So they went and spent that day with Him. Early one morning, after His resurrection, Jesus stood on the shore of Galilee, but the disciples in a fishing boat did not recognize Him. “Come,” He called out, “let’s have breakfast together.”<sup>43</sup>

**Differentiation.** Jesus cared deeply for each of His students, and saw unlimited potential in each life. This did not imply, though, that He treated everyone the same. Rather, He differentiated His instruction in order to meet His students’ backgrounds, needs, abilities, and dreams. Take the case of Simon the Pharisee. At a meal in Simon’s house, a woman of ill repute<sup>44</sup> arrived uninvited and broke open an alabaster jar of ointment to anoint Jesus’ feet. When Simon wondered to himself how Jesus could be a prophet and permit such a travesty, Jesus told Simon a story of two debtors, one who owed much and the other but little. Although it might seem the perfect opportunity to expose Simon’s own hypocrisy, Jesus used a “silk glove” approach in which none but Simon understood the true meaning of the story.

In contrast, consider the case of Simon Peter. When Jesus informed His disciples of His impending death, Peter began to rebuke Him. In the presence of all the disciples, Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!” Here Jesus used “shock therapy.” Two men, even with the same name, but a very different approach.<sup>45</sup>

**Held Children in High Regard.** One day, little children were



brought to Jesus for Him to bless. When the disciples tried to turn away those who brought them, Jesus intervened, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” On another occasion, Jesus instructed His disciples, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father.” For those who abused children or attempted to entice them with evil, Christ had stern words, “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea

with a large millstone tied around his neck.”<sup>46</sup>

**Valued the Marginalized.** Jesus also reached out to those who were rejected by society. These marginalized ones included the poor, ethnic minorities, and cultural outcasts. With these He associated—conversing, visiting in their homes, and touching the “untouchables.”

- Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down. I must stay at your house today.” All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

- The Samaritans came to Him and urged Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days.

- A poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.”

- Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man with leprosy. “I am willing,” He said. “Be clean!”<sup>47</sup>

**Centrality of Prayer.** Perhaps the greatest characteristic of the greatest Teacher who ever lived was the importance of prayer in His life. Frequently, Jesus would seek out a quiet place to pray—sometimes early in the morning, or at evening, or through the entire night. He didn’t pray just for Himself and for the work He had been given, but also for His students. Jesus’ prayer life so impressed His disciples that one day, when He finished praying, one of His students requested, “Lord, teach us to pray.”<sup>48</sup>

### The Impact of His Teaching

Jesus had a profound influence on His students. When He taught, His listeners were surprised at His teaching, because He spoke with confidence, in contrast to the teachers of the law. Turning to each other in amazement, they asked, “Where did this man get these things?” “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”<sup>49</sup>

One day, alarmed about Jesus’ growing popularity, the chief priests sent the temple guards to arrest Him. At the end of the day, the guards returned empty-handed. “Why didn’t you bring Him in?” the priests raged. “No one ever spoke the way this

man does,” the guards declared.

After His resurrection, Christ appeared unrecognized to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and fell into conversation with them. Later that evening, when they finally realized who their Guest had been, they exclaimed, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”<sup>50</sup>

The influence of Jesus, the Teacher sent from God, can also be experienced in our lives. To paraphrase the words of the Apostle John: Jesus did many other things, as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. But these were written that you might have faith in Christ, the Son of God; and having faith, that you might teach as He taught.<sup>51</sup>

### Examples of Christ's Teaching

#### Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)

- **Availability.** The student came at night, outside of “office hours.”
- **Challenge.** “You, a teacher, do not know this?”
- **Anomaly.** “You must be born again.”
- **Analogy.** Compared the Holy Spirit to the wind.
- **Historical Event.** Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness.
- **Contrast.** Light vs. darkness, condemnation vs. salvation.
- **Transition.** Concrete to abstract, physical to spiritual.
- **Affective dimension.** “For God so loved the world.”
- **Purpose.** To experience salvation and enter into eternal life.
- **The rest of the story.** John 7:45-52; 19:38-40.

#### The Samaritan Woman (John 4:5-26)

- **Marginalized student.** A woman, member of a minority, ostracized by her own community.
- **Availability.** Jesus sat down by the well.
- **Initiative.** Jesus asked her, “Could you give me a drink?”
- **Motivation.** Begins with water, the student’s immediate interest.
- **Anomaly.** “You will not be thirsty again.”
- **Transition.** Known to unknown, physical to spiritual, immediate to eternal.
- **Active learning.** “Call your husband.”
- **Concept clarification.** Worship is not a place, but a spiritual experience.
- **Purpose.** To know God and experience His transforming power.
- **The rest of the story.** John 4:39-42.



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