

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 5--JESUS THE MASTER TEACHER

Jesus seems to have chosen Galilee as the chief scene of his early ministry, although the Gospel of John takes note of additional activity in Judea. It was in Galilee that the first disciples were chosen, and here his healing work began. In and about Capernaum, a major city of Galilee, Jesus found in largest numbers "The lost sheep of the house of Israel."

From the account in the Gospel of Mark, it is evident that Jesus' healings first attracted the attention of the people. Although he taught in the synagogue with such power that "They were astounded at his teaching," it was through his healings that his fame spread.

The miracles were truly an important example of "the signs that follow." However, the world would not have long remembered Jesus were it not also for the marvelous message that he left for humanity. For spiritual content and practical value, it has never been excelled.

There is much dispute regarding the length of Jesus' ministry. It could not have lasted over three years, and some authorities estimate it at a year and a half. John A. T. Robinson, in *The Priority of John*, outlines a plausible chronology spanning two years. In any case, to have exerted the tremendous influence that he did, Jesus must have spoken with an authority that far transcended that of Israel's religious leaders.

JESUS AS A TEACHER

Jesus referred to what is today called the Old Testament as "The Scriptures." He quoted these Scriptures with genuine respect, though he was selective in the way that he used them. His teachings reveal an intimate knowledge of Deuteronomy, Numbers, Leviticus, Psalms, and the books of prophecy. Noah, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, and even Jonah are mentioned in his teachings.

Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus spoke with a quiet authority, not of dogmatism but of deep conviction born of personal experience. This positiveness came out of his own realization regarding God, humanity, and life. The "Thou Shalt Nots" of earlier teachers became "Thou Shalt," yet Jesus "came not to destroy but to fulfill," to build a better structure upon the foundation laid by Moses and the prophets.

Jesus had a keen knowledge of human nature. He knew the hopes and ideals of his people, as well as their problems. All of his teachings express his love and empathy, his desire to help rather than to criticize.

Crowds followed Jesus everywhere, attracted not only by his message and healing work, but by the charm of his personality. He gave himself unreservedly to all who sought his help in public or in private. He even went forth to seek those who were in need.

Jesus taught from the basis of Oneness. (John 10:30) "I do nothing on my own, but I speak instructed me." (John 8:28) In his teachings, "The Father and I are one." these things as the Father "The Father" was also your Father and our Father. He emphasized the potential for

our entering into this personal relationship, e.g., "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:8)

The value of Jesus' teaching does not depend upon any historical facts about his life. It lies in their deep spiritual content, and practical application to the problems of everyday life in any age.

JESUS' TEACHING METHODS

Jesus taught from individual experience. He spoke primarily from his consciousness of oneness with Divine Omniscience. In his parables and allegories, we find archetypal imagery contacted through deep meditation, as well as simple language and illustrations drawn from the life and environment of his people. This way of teaching was a direct contrast to the dogmatic, complex methods of reasoning used by the Jewish teachers of his day. Jesus adapted his methods to his audiences. He had a clear, understandable message for the common people; yet he could also hold his own with learned scribes and scholars.

It is true that Jesus, on occasion, denounced the Pharisees and mercenary high priests. For the most part, however, he was satisfied to commend the good rather than to condemn the evil. His method was to call people's attention to the great realities of life, hoping that the mistakes would be recognized and rectified.

When his critics marveled at Jesus' teaching because he lacked rabbinical training, Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own." (John 7:16-17)

Jesus effectively used object lessons to bring out basic truths. These include both spoken parables, and parables of action. The Gospels include numerous examples of both. For example, Jesus stresses the value and necessity of expressing gratitude in the story of the healing of the ten lepers. The mention of the Samaritan, as the only one who gave thanks, would remind the Jews of that period that their hated enemy of past ages was the one who was truly grateful. The incident reminds us that the thankful spirit should be expressed at all times.

There was great power in Jesus' example, since he based his life on his spiritual consciousness and the teaching that flowed from it. As the German scholar, Joachim Jeremias, noted, "Jesus did not confine himself to spoken parables, but also performed parabolic actions.... [He] not only proclaimed the message of the parables. . he lived it and embodied it in his own person."¹

Mircea Eliade observed: "In traditional cultures the majority of human gestures had symbolic significance. This assertion should be understood to mean that the activities of the individual, even in the most 'profane' intervals of his life, were oriented constantly toward a transhuman reality. Man tries, that is, to integrate himself into an absolute reality which, in the majority of instances, is intuited as a "totality": Universal Life, Cosmos. As such, every human act had, in addition to its intrinsic utility, a symbolic meaning which transfigured it."²

LITERARY FORMS OF JESUS' TEACHING

A large part of our Bible is poetry rather than prose. A careful study of Jesus' teaching shows that much of it was lyrical and poetic in form. We know today that metaphor is not a mere literary ornament, but is at the core of all language. To speak of "literal language" is a contradiction in terms; to speak of "symbolic language" is redundant. Nevertheless, various types of literature differ both in form and function, and understanding literary types helps us to understand the intent as well as the content of Jesus' statements.

Jesus was conversant with the literary forms used by Israel's great teachers and writers. Parables, allegories, similes, metaphors, proverbs, beatitudes, paradoxes, hyperboles--he used all of these literary forms to convey his message.

THE PARABLE

While Jesus did not invent the parable, his original way of using the parable amounted to the creation of a new literary genre.

The history of parables research, over several generations of scholars, has consisted of a series of new developments followed by dead ends. Since the 1960's, however, the field has taken some new and clarifying directions.³ One of the primary goals has been to ascertain what Jesus actually said. Many of Jesus' parables show signs of later editing. Also, many of them have been placed in secondary settings by the gospel writers, thus doing more to conceal their true message than to reveal it. When Jesus' parables are read and considered in their true light, it becomes apparent that he taught what is today called Divine Science or New Thought.

Norman Perrin of the University of Chicago stated:

"In the case of the parables of Jesus, the interpreter faces the specific problem of reconstructing the text to be interpreted. The parables of Jesus were delivered orally; so far as we know, Jesus himself wrote no single word of them. We are therefore dependent upon texts which were written later, and which may or may not represent an accurate reminiscence of the parables as Jesus taught them. The texts we have represent the parables as they stood at the end of a considerable process of oral and written transmission and reinterpretation, both among the followers of Jesus during his lifetime, and among the early Christian communities after his death."⁴

The following traits of Jesus' parables are especially important:

(1) Their most prominent symbol, as used by Jesus, is the Kingdom of God, which he also called the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of the Father, or simply the Kingdom. In this imagery, he refers of the inner kingdom of spiritual consciousness, which is at the core of his teaching. In Divine Science, we speak of it in terms of the Omnipresence and Omniscience of God, and of Christ Consciousness. Kingship also means rule, and the Kingdom also refers to God as Omnipotence, having all power not only in the universe at large, but within our own consciousness.

(2) The parable form has an inside and outside--two stories, as it were--that are always parallel. This form implies that life itself is parabolic. The parable form, as Jesus used it, affirms the basic law of creative consciousness: as we think and picture, so we experience. As within, so without; as above, so below.

(3) All interpretations of Jesus' parables, to be valid, must agree with these two basic propositions. Nevertheless, an outstanding trait of the parables is their inexhaustible capacity to generate new meaning within this basic frame of reference. As noted in Lesson 1, this ever-new meaning is generated through what Norman Perrin called "a dynamic process of interaction between text and interpreter," which is central to the interpretive process.

This process can only function on an individual basis. With the parables of Jesus, however, the process is one that brings healing as well as insight. Their imagery is such that they tend to change the reader or hearer on a subconscious level, establishing wholeness and harmony in our psyches and in our everyday lives. They have function as well as form, and that function is one of whole-making and transformation.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The material in Matthew, Chapters 5,6, and 7, is called the Sermon on the Mount. Many parallel sayings appear in the Gospel of Luke and the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas. Students will greatly benefit from reading The Sermon on the Mount, by Emmet Fox, which interprets this material.

The teachings of Jesus, as given in Matthew 5-7 and parallels, do more than give advice concerning our spiritual development and way of life. They imply a whole new frame of reference, rejecting limiting beliefs and affirming a universe where God is truly in charge, the One Presence and One Power, God the Good, All-governing.

NOTES

1. Jeremias, Joachim; The Parables of Jesus, Second Revised Edition; New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972, pp. 227, 229
2. Eliade, Mircea, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona; Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts; New York, Crossroad, 1986, p. 130
3. See Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom; op cit, pp. 89-193
4. Op cit, p. 3

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Wink, Walter; Transforming Bible Study; Abingdon Press, 1980

Winterhalter, Robert; The Fifth Gospel; Harper & Row, 1988. A more detailed work, specifically on the parables of Jesus, is in process.

INDEX OF JESUS PARABLES

The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)
 The Chief Seats (Luke 14:7-11)
 The Children at Play (Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35)
 The Cloth/Wineskins (Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39; Thomas 47)
 The Doorkeeper (Matthew 13:33-37)
 The Faithful Servants (Luke 12:35-38)
 The Fish Net (Matthew 13:47-48)
 The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
 The Great Fish (Thomas 8)
 The Great Supper (Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-24; Thomas 64)
 The Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44; Thomas 109)
 The Importunate Friend (Luke 11:5-8)
 The Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1-8)
 The Jar (Thomas 97)
 The King's Warfare (Luke 14:31-32)
 The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
 The Lamp (Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-17; 11:33; Thomas 32-33)
 The Leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21; Thomas 96)
 The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
 The Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7; Thomas 107)
 The Man With the Sword (Thomas 98)
 The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19; Thomas 20)

The Pearl (Matthew 13:45-46; Thomas 76)
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The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21; Thomas 63)
The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29)
The Servant Entrusted With Supervision (Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46)
The Sower (Matthew 13:3-9; Mark ~:2-9; Luke 8:4-8; Thomas 9)
The Talents (Matthew 25:14-29; Luke 19:12-27)
The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)
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The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 8:23-35)
The Unprofitable Servant (Luke 17:7-10)
The Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16:1-13)
The Wedding Robe (Matthew 22:1-13)
The Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30; Thomas 57)
The Wicked Husbandmen/Rejected Cornerstone (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19; Thomas 65-66)
The Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49)

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

- (1) Read the following parables, listed in Question 1 below:
The Talents (Matthew 25:14-29; Luke 19:12-27)
The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14)
The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)
The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21; Thomas 63)
The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19; Thomas 20)
The Pearl (Matthew 13:45-46; Thomas 76)
- (2) Read Matthew, Ch. 5, 6, and 7

QUESTIONS

1. Give a spiritual interpretation of any one of the following parables, according to Divine Science principles: The Talents, the Pharisee and the Publican, The Good Samaritan, The Ten Virgins, The Rich Fool, The Mustard Seed, the Pearl.
2. Give a spiritual interpretation of any five verses taken from the Sermon on the Mount.