

Unit 2 Introduction

Jesus as the Master Teacher

The imagery could not be more compelling. In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ascends to the top of the mount to provide what will be one of the longest series of teachings recorded in the Gospels. Anyone sharing Matthew's familiarity with the Old Testament could not help but draw parallels with Moses on Mount Sinai, delivering the original Ten Commandments, the central teachings of what would later be known as the "law" or "Torah" that guided the children of Israel. Bible Scholar Roger Hahn notes:

For Matthew, the mountain is the place of divine revelation. Like Moses who brought the Law from Mount Sinai, Jesus teaches from the mountainside. The statement that Jesus sat down also reflects a Mosaic motif. Sitting was the position for rabbis when they gave official teaching about the Law. Their seat was called the seat of Moses. To say that Jesus sat down claims both His authority to give teaching from God and His connection to Moses.¹

Indeed, Jesus himself acknowledges He has come to fill the law "full" with meaning, and the Sermon on the Mount seems an appropriate place to start. Yet, the Sermon on the Mount really reflects not just one sermon, but an entire series of teachings that Matthew collects into one unit of learning. Nor does Jesus merely draw upon the Torah, He also engages the prophets to generate a new vision of life in the kingdom of God.

Jesus, the Prophetic Teacher of His Day

Jesus, as prophetic teacher, also resounds throughout Matthew. Jesus' teachings seem to consistently intersect with passages within the Old Testament, not only as a teacher of the law, but also as a prophetic teacher as well.

Matthew 5:21 -Deuteronomy 5:17

Matthew 11:10 -Malachi 3:1

Matthew 13:14 -Isaiah 6:9

Matthew 15:4 -Deuteronomy 5:16

Matthew 15:8-9 -Isaiah 29:13

Matthew 19:18 -Deuteronomy 5:16

By the time of Matthew's writing, Jesus' approach to teaching could easily be set alongside two different traditions. The apocalyptic "Teacher of Righteousness" associated with the Qumran community, and the Greek stoic tradition, particularly Epictetus.² In Matthew's writing, Jesus seems to mirror a similar message: rebuking Jewish leadership, defining Christian community, missionally equipping followers and pastorally guiding disciples in service and ministry.

In his recent book, *Teaching the Way of Jesus*, Jack Seymour chronicles both the challenges of the Jewish people and Jesus' calling them to live faithfully according to God's covenant that provided both identity and expected vocation for the children of Israel. Seymour writes,

In a time of crisis, with competing agendas and efforts to respond to Rome's oppression and God's presence, the vocation Jesus proclaims is simple and clear... Just like Jesus, His followers are grounded in God's grace, knowing that even in the midst of loss, pain, and political oppression, God's grace is still present. The presence of God's grace inspires the followers to life the covenant, or even more, it expects those who receive (this covenant) to live it! The vocation of followers is to restore and live community even in a broken world. That is precisely what Jesus saw God's kingdom actions doing.³

Jesus continues to teach through God's word a similar, prophetic, message today.

Jesus as the Consummate Teacher

Normally people studying the New Testament encounter a number of descriptions of Jesus: savior, healer, miracle worker, prophet, priest, and even king. What about Jesus as teacher? In fact, outside of the title "Lord," the Gospels record "teacher" as the second most popular title for Jesus, often using the Greek term *didaskale*, or the Jewish title of Rabbi.⁴ It seems apparent, at an early age, Jesus also went through the normal Jewish instruction of His time.⁵ Still, Jesus displayed incredible authority as a teacher during His ministry (Matthew 7:28). We need to affirm with those who encountered Jesus that He indeed served as an exceptional teacher.

The Sermon on the Mount indicates two different audiences, the masses gathered and the specific disciples. Interpreters tend limit Jesus' efforts to 12 disciples while overlooking Christ's direct instruction to crowds (Matthew 5:1), His sending of the 70 (Luke 10), and the fact that both women and others were also disciples (Luke 8:1-3, Mark 10:46-52, Matthew 10:29-34). We have to resist a simplistic approach to Jesus' teaching ministry. Jesus used diverse objects and people, like a young child, in strategic teaching moments (Matthew 18:2). However, we need to understand the meaning behind these methods as we consider carefully Jesus the teacher.

Organizing Jesus' Teaching

Matthew provides a unique example of Jesus as teacher. The gospel includes five large blocks of Jesus's teaching, each concluding with a variation of "when Jesus finished these sayings" (Matthew 7:21, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1). This organization enables easier teaching and memorization. Another way to organize Jesus' teaching rests with His intent to 1) shape people into disciples, 2) critically and creatively engage their thinking, and 3) challenge them to learn through compassionate service to others.

Teaching to Form Disciples

Jesus taught the central message of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23, 18) and sought to shape people according to the standards of God's rule, particularly in His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7). Much of Jesus' didactic teaching resembled an earlier prophet and teacher, Moses. When Jesus states "you have heard it said..." (Matthew 5: 21, 27, 33, 38, 43), Christ references the core of the Jewish teaching tradition, the Torah or Law, given by Moses. That early teaching shaped the children of Israel into a nation. Jesus sought to shape His followers into a people whose hearts and lives would conform to the kingdom message. Jesus gave them instructions that helped followers "live into" that kingdom through their actions and relationships. A number of imperative, almost proverbial, statements appear as commandments for living (Matthew 5:44, 48; 6:31, 34; 7:12). At other times Jesus uses more descriptive language, like the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11), to portray a particular view of life. Practical instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, and in other settings, provided common practices for those following these instructions. To become a disciple of Jesus was to enter into a new "culture," one shaped by kingdom values and kingdom living. Jesus often modeled these kingdom values in His life and actions (Matthew 8:18-22, 12:1-8), but Christ's teaching guided the disciples as they "practiced" their faith through their relationship with Jesus.

Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking

Jesus not only "shaped" people's lives toward the kingdom of God through His teaching, He also exposed their own assumptions and proclivities through indirect means. Jesus engaged the mind of His listeners, using basic strategies to quicken understanding. He would often use proverbial sayings and analogies that captured the listener's attention (Matthew 6:22, 34; 15:14). Jesus employed aphorisms, pithy statements with self-evident meaning (Mark 8:35, Matthew 10:16, Mark 10:25), which were popular in Jewish times as in ours. These statements sparked the imagination, provoked discussion, and deepened reflection among the hearers.

Jesus also taught in parables that often forced people to see the world, and often their own faulty beliefs, in a new light. Unlike fables, parables were metaphorical stories anchored in everyday life and actions with a unique surprise within the story (Matthew 13; 18; 20:1-16; 21:28–22:14). Jesus explained early that the parables provided insight into the kingdom of God (Matthew 13). However, His use surprising element in the story, really more like a time bomb that exploded with meaning for the listeners, often revealed something uncomfortable about their own world and expectations. While many of these parables may seem obscure in our day, Jesus' audience often "caught" the hidden meaning right away, particularly when the parable challenged the religious authorities.

However, Jesus direct instruction challenged religious leaders understanding of traditions, opening the door for a new way of seeing the world (Matthew 15:1-20; 18:21-35; 19:2-12). Jesus' authority may have been uniquely His own, but His manner of teaching stood

within a long line of other prophetic teachers that challenged impoverished imaginations. In all, Jesus' followers as well as His opponents found their perspectives challenged and their minds opened to a creative new way of living the kingdom of God.

Servant-learning

While we want to avoid simplistic explanations, there can be no doubt that Jesus also taught as He compassionately modeled and encouraged servant actions. Luke's gospel might best represent this approach as we find Jesus in among the poor and outcast of society. Despite the emphasis on the collected sayings in Matthew, one cannot ignore Jesus' direct acts of ministry in tandem with His teachings (Matthew 4:23). Each account serves as a call to learn through these compassionate acts of healing, hospitality, and deliverance (Matthew 9). Jesus not only modeled life in the kingdom of God, but He did call His followers to a unique way of life (Matthew 4:18-22; 19:23-30). Jesus sent His disciples, as apprentices, to preach and heal (Mark 3; 6; Luke 9; Matthew 10). Their actions helped them to learn through similar actions of compassion. Jesus finally modeled the ultimate act of servanthood through His washing of the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). Jesus' act and instruction provides a somber reminder of both compassion and humility. While current educational approaches rightly stress service-learning as an important framework for education, Christ's followers aptly understand this approach as "servant" learning, where we grow through compassionate, caring service to others.

In all Jesus proved to be an exemplary teacher and guide. His passion included teaching people so they might be formed into kingdom values, what John Wesley might call holiness of heart and life. Jesus knew that such shaping required challenging our assumptions and providing a new, creative, way of life. He also knew that we must learn and live into that kingdom living through our caring and compassionate service toward others. Collectively, Jesus-shaped lives, enlightened minds, and empowered both hearts and hands to live out the kingdom of God. For each of us who aspire to become "master teachers" in our local settings, we might best begin by following the example of Jesus, the "Master Teacher."

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1. Roger Hahn, *Matthew: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 83.
2. John Yueh-Han Yieh, *One Teacher: Jesus' Teaching Role in Matthew's Gospel Report* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 95-234.
3. Jack L. Seymour *Teaching the Way of Jesus: Educating Christians for Faithful Living*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).
4. Charles F. Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 214-222.
5. James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, *A History of Christian Education* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 61-62.