



Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

SESSION 2

| *Jesus is called Rabbi, Teacher, and Master.*

Introduction

Jesus is frequently identified as “Teacher” (forty-four times) in the four Gospels. There are also many occasions when Jesus is described as teaching (forty-eight times) or having taught (fifteen times). When you add these direct references to Jesus as teacher or teaching to the times when he is called “Rabbi” (thirteen) or “Master” (seven), it is clear that one of the key aspects of Jesus’ ministry was that of teacher. In this session we will explore the occasions, the method, and the message of Jesus’ teaching. There is much we can learn from Jesus as teacher in this second week of our Lenten journey.

Rabbi, Teacher, and Master

Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes were well-developed roles of authority in the religious life of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, whereas the role of rabbi was a relatively new phenomenon. In the Gospels, there is one occasion where John the Baptist is identified as a rabbi (John 3:26), and in all other occurrences of the word *rabbi*, Jesus is the one so identified. Jesus is addressed as *Rabbi* twelve times: twice in Matthew by Judas, twice by Judas and once by Peter in Mark, and in John six times by the disciples and once by Nicodemus, the Pharisee.

The meaning of *rabbi* is made explicit in John 1:38, “They said to him ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher).” The rabbis gathered students, or disciples, who lived and traveled with them. There is no evidence in Scripture that Jesus had been a student of any other rabbi. However, when he was twelve years old he stayed



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behind in Jerusalem to learn from the teachers. “After three days they [his parents] found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46–47).

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him he acted as the traditional rabbi by gathering his learners to accompany him. Jesus and the disciples became a community of teacher and learners, or followers: sharing meals, traveling together, celebrating religious holy days, and living together. The disciples served their Rabbi in a variety of ways: getting food for him, protecting him, rowing or sailing the boat, procuring a donkey, and preparing the Passover meal.

The Gospel of Luke has no reference to Jesus as Rabbi but there are five passages where the disciples address him as “Master” and one passage where the ten lepers called out to him, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (17:13). It appears that Luke preferred Master to Rabbi,

because that term does not appear in any of the other three Gospels. The word *Master* is a respectful form of address toward one who has authority or is in charge of people or property. In Luke, Master is used synonymously with the word *Rabbi* or *Teacher*.

Teacher is second only to Lord as the most used title for Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus is addressed as “Teacher” in all four Gospels (Matt. ten times, Mark thirteen, Luke fourteen, and John seven). In addition to the direct address of Jesus as “Teacher,” there are sixty-three passages with specific references to Jesus teaching. This is clearly a major role of Jesus in his relationship with the disciples, other followers, the crowds, and the religious authorities. It is a primary role by which Jesus was known in the Gospels.

Persons Who Address Jesus as Teacher

As you would expect, the twelve disciples address Jesus as teacher. The religious authorities, however, address Jesus as teacher three times as often as the disciples. Persons in the crowd (rich young man, blind man, a father asking for healing of his son, and several other anonymous persons) call to Jesus with the title “Teacher.” Nicodemus, a Pharisee, Martha (Mary’s sister), and Mary Magdalene address Jesus as teacher. Jesus also referred to himself as teacher on two occasions, when he asked the disciples to request a room for celebrating the Passover (Luke 22:11) and after he washed the disciples’ feet (John 13:14)

Even though there is no evidence of Jesus being “trained” as a rabbi or teacher he functioned as one and was recognized to be one. The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who were most familiar with the Scriptures of the Law and the Prophets addressed Jesus as teacher on almost every occasion when they encountered him. On several occasions they asked questions of the disciples about their teacher, Jesus. Clearly they recognized Jesus’ authority even though they questioned his interpretation of the Law and saw him as a threat to their own authority.

Occasions of Jesus Teaching

When one reads all four Gospels it seems that Jesus took advantage of every opportunity and location to teach. He visited synagogues on the Sabbath and taught

in Nazareth (Mark 6:2 and Luke 4:15), in Capernaum (Mark 1:21 and Luke 4:31), “throughout Galilee” (Matt. 4:23), and “about all their villages and cities” (Matt. 9:35).

Toward the end of his ministry Jesus taught in the Temple in Jerusalem. He taught: in the “middle of festival” (John 7:14), “early in the morning” (John 8:2), “day after day” (Matt. 26:55), “every day” (Luke 19:47), and “in the treasury of the temple” (John 8:20). Jesus also referred to his teaching, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in the synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret” (John 18:20). In this statement Jesus also discloses something of his style of teaching, “I have said nothing in secret.” He was fearless in confronting the religious establishment in the most sacred place of Jewish worship.

In addition to Jesus teaching in the synagogue and Temple he taught in the cities and villages (Matt. 9:35), on the side of a mountain (Matt. 5:2), beside the sea (Mark 4:1), in a certain place after he had finished praying (Luke 11:1), “to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan” (Mark 10:1), from a boat “a little way from the shore” (Luke 5:3), in “one town and village after another” (Luke 13:22). There are occasions when Jesus and the disciples walked along or gathered in a quiet place where he taught them as well as times when he taught the crowds. An example is in last week’s session where we explored Jesus’ interaction with his disciples when parents brought their children to be blessed by Jesus. Though there are no words in that passage that explicitly state that Jesus was teaching, it is obvious that he was teaching some important truths about the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ Methods of Teaching

Jesus used all of the intelligences. Jesus was a master teacher, using all the resources and methods available to him to teach truths about the kingdom of God and what is expected of those who would be his followers. There is a modern theory of teaching and learning known as “multiple intelligences” espoused by Howard Gardner¹ and his colleagues. They propose that there are at least eight ways the brain learns and that every person is intelligent to various degrees in all eight ways, and usually show prominence in two or three of the categories. I have often wondered to what extent Jesus employed

all eight intelligences in his teaching. A brief and limited description of the intelligences and summary of Jesus' use of them follows. Though we might think that Jesus lived in "primitive" times, the examples of the diverse ways he utilized all of the intelligences to communicate with people of every status and condition show that he was truly a master teacher.

Jesus speaking in parables may be the best example of his teaching method. A parable is a brief or extended story based upon items and experiences common to its listeners that communicate profound truths about the kingdom of God. Among the familiar subjects of Jesus' parables are family relationships ("a father had two sons"), household items (lamp, basket, coin, cloth, wineskin, yeast), economic realities (creditor and debtor, tax collector, laborers in the vineyard, talents), agricultural items (sheep and shepherd, seeds and soil, vinedressers, fig tree, mustard seed), and other societal experiences (wedding feast, a beaten man, unforgiving servant, persistent



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widow). The truth of a parable is not always obvious. After telling the parable of the seeds and good soil, Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 8:8).

There are at least thirty-nine different parables told by Jesus, some of them reported in two or three of the

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

1. Linguistic Intelligence² is the capacity to use words effectively, whether orally or in writing. Jesus used parables very effectively, answered and asked questions to get at the heart of a matter, and taught the people with authority. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) are two good examples.

2. Logical-Mathematical Intelligence is the capacity to use numbers effectively, to reason well, to categorize, generalize, and hypothesize. The parables of the sower in the field (Matt. 13:1–9) and of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30) are examples.

3. Spatial Intelligence is the ability to perceive a visual-spatial world. When asked about paying taxes or not, Jesus asked for a coin and then asked, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" (Matt. 22:20).

4. Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence calls upon using one's whole body to communicate. Many of Jesus' miracles of healing happened as he reached out and touched the person in need, for example, the two blind men (Matt. 9:27–31) and a deaf man (Mark 7:31–37).

5. Musical Intelligence is the capacity to perceive, discriminate, transform, and express musical forms.

There is little use of this intelligence by Jesus noted in the Gospels, but we can infer his knowledge and experience with Psalms, which would fit in this category. In Matthew we read that after the Last Supper they went out singing (Matt. 26:30).

6. Interpersonal Intelligence is the ability to perceive and make distinctions in the moods, intentions, motivations, and feelings of other people. Jesus demonstrated interpersonal intelligence at its fullest. There are examples of Jesus exercising this intelligence in virtually every chapter of the Gospels.

7. Intrapersonal Intelligence is having self-knowledge and the ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge. It includes the capacity of self-discipline and self-understanding. Jesus being tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11) and praying in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46) are two of many examples.

8. Naturalist Intelligence includes awareness of one's environment, sensitivity to natural phenomena, and stewardship of all of God's creation. Jesus was comfortable in any environment and used elements of nature for some of his parables: the sower (Matt. 13:1–9), mustard seed (13:31–32), and the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7).

Gospels. For us to fully understand the parables we need to learn more about the life and times of Jesus and the people of his day. For instance, a younger son asking for his inheritance while the father is still living was unheard of in the culture of Jesus' time. In that same parable, the scene where the father runs to greet his prodigal son also is a radical image and thought. Another surprising radical image for Jesus' day was the suggestion that a Samaritan is the example of who the good neighbor is to a Jew who is beaten and left for dead. That Jesus used these radical, unheard-of images to make his point shows how "out of the box" Jesus was as a teacher.

Jesus was a master at responding to questions and asking questions. The disciples asked him questions, as did the religious authorities and others seeking healing or help. And Jesus asked questions of the same groups. Questions were asked of Jesus regarding the Law and his identity, requesting him to explain something or to respond to a need, and about the future. Sometimes Jesus answered questions asked of him and other times he refused to answer. On occasion he turned the question back to the person by asking another question.

One narrative that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke focuses on a very important question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mark 12:28–34, see also Matt. 22:34–40, and Luke 10:25–28). Read the three passages to discover the similarities and differences between them. The truth of these narratives is that the bottom line regarding what is expected of faithful people is to love God with their whole being and to love their neighbors as themselves. This is not a new truth espoused by Jesus; rather it is his affirmation of the truth of the Law that God's people have known for centuries.

By his actions Jesus was an incredibly effective teacher. Welcoming children, reaching out to lepers, speaking with women, associating with tax collectors, and engaging religious authorities in debate were actions that taught much about Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God and what it means to love God with one's whole being and one's neighbor as one's self. For one exam-

ple, look at the passage in John 13:1–20 where Jesus was with his disciples and offered to wash their feet prior to the Passover festival. By this example Jesus taught what was expected of those who would minister in his name. Another instance of Jesus teaching by example is in Luke 11:1 when, after he finished praying, the disciples asked him to teach them to pray.

Conclusion

From the beginning of his ministry (Mark 1:1) to the end (Mark 16:20) Jesus proclaimed the good news in his role as rabbi, master, and teacher. The good news was summarized when he taught in the synagogue in Nazareth. He read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). We could spend another chapter documenting the ways Jesus brought good news to the poor, gave hope to the captives, healed the blind and infirm, freed those who were oppressed by whatever circumstance, and shared the Lord's favor with all who would receive it.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
2. I am using the descriptions of the eight intelligences from Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Sunday: Matthew 5:1–12

Read this passage of the Beatitudes in two or more translations to gain a sense of the breadth and depth of these few verses. Thank God for the ways you have been blessed.

Monday: Luke 15:11–32

What are the radical images and actions that are presented in this parable? Pray to God as a younger child and/or as an older child, seeking God's love and forgiveness.

Tuesday: Matthew 6:5–15 and Luke 11:1–13

What do you learn about prayer from these two passages? Pray the Lord's Prayer four to six times. Each time you pray it, pause after a different phrase and repeat that phrase ten or more times.

Wednesday: Mark 12:28–34

Jesus commends the scribe who knows the essence of the Law. How do you love God with your whole being and your neighbor as yourself? Pray that God will empower you with such love.

Thursday: Matthew 6:25–34

What are your worries? How do those worries interfere with daily tasks and relationships? Share with God your worries and ask God to help you not be overwhelmed by worry.

Friday: Luke 19:1–10

If you had been present as one of Jesus' disciples, what are some questions you would have had about Jesus? What are you learning from Jesus' words and actions? Pray for understanding.

Saturday: John 13:1–20

Imagine yourself in the place of Peter. How would you have felt if Jesus, your Lord and Master, had come to you to wash your feet? Pray to be open to whatever Jesus desires to share with you.