

The Practical Teaching Methods of Jesus Christ

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I. Jesus Had Special Conditions for Teaching

In beginning such a study as this, it is necessary for us to keep in mind the special conditions Jesus had in His teaching. Remember the uniqueness of His Person and His message. He not only taught the Word of God – He was the Word of God. Even the people of His day recognized that He was different from any other teacher with whom they had ever come into contact. “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the law.” (Matthew 7,29)

As we have all seen personal contacts play an important part in the teacher-pupil relationship. Jesus was keenly aware of this. His contact with His pupils went beyond His “classroom.” He knew each of His students individually. He did not have a group of unwilling students, as some teachers do. Even those in His larger classes and even His enemies were there by choice and listened because they, chose to do so. He was not limited to a particular age group. Even in His more casual contacts with larger “classes,” the relationship was unique involving as it did His authority, His works, His words, and His Person. With His “regular students” – His disciples – He had constant contact. He ate, drank, and slept in their company.

Jesus had a unique intimacy with His students. He lived with them. He was at their disposal any time of day or night. He had come to serve and serve He did. He established confidence and esteem between Himself and His students. Another aspect of this intimacy was the way He could enter into the problem situations of His Pupils. He knew their sinfulness and could say to them: “Your sins are forgiven.” He could sit with an outcast woman and quietly reveal her need in such a way that she learned a lesson no one else had been able to teach her.

Most teachers are expected to teach in a set classroom and at a certain time for a certain length of time. Jesus was not restricted to such a classroom or to an imposed time. He taught as the occasion demanded, and used whatever the environment happened to be as His “classroom.” Jesus was free in this way and His methods varied according to circumstances. He taught in the temple and the synagogue. He taught one of His most famous lessons on a mountain and repeated much of that on a plain. He demonstrated His lessons at a wedding, a funeral, and a graveside. He taught on a road and in a corn field. One of His favorite classrooms was a garden. He taught in a palace and before His own tomb. He even taught from the cross.

In regard to curriculum Jesus' conditions for teaching were special and different from ours today. He had no formal curriculum. His curriculum was His own. His lessons varied according to the circumstances. The center or “core” of His teaching was Himself and the “abundant life” He had come to bring. I do not mean to imply that Jesus had no plan to His teaching. He clearly did. He knew when and just how much to teach at any one time or any one place. His teaching was by no means haphazard. His students would be thoroughly instructed in all they needed to know before His course would be complete.

II. Jesus' Understanding of His Students

Jesus demonstrated a remarkable understanding of His students, and had a ready interest in their needs and problems. He was available when men sought His counsel, as when the ruler Nicodemus came to Him at night. At other times He ate with publicans and “sinners” who were considered “unworthy” by the Jews. His message was available to all, despite human “class distinctions.”

He never ridiculed His pupils. He did not appear to them as overbearing or haughty. He was never impatient or tactless, and never showed discourtesy towards those who approached Him, not even to His enemies. He was never insincere, nor ever vacillating. He was always consistent in His teaching. He was approachable and friendly. Even His voice was well modulated. We read that the people wondered at the gracious words that proceeded from His mouth.

He motivated His pupils so that they could rise to heights beyond their own expectations. Yet He also understood their limitations. He showed confidence in their abilities and encouraged them. He recognized their potential even when they were slow in learning. He provided for their individual needs and gave personal attention as necessary. He was never stereotyped, but displayed remarkable flexibility according to differing situations and needs. He varied His teaching methods and approaches to His students as we will see later in this paper. He knew human nature and sympathized with people in their needs.

We even find that He demonstrated the need for relaxation with His students. When they heard of the death of John the Baptist, it was Jesus who suggested that they go aside and rest for a while.

It is essential to good teaching that there be proper relationships between teacher and pupil and between one pupil and another. Jesus was acutely aware of this. He sought to establish confidence and esteem between Himself and His students. The Samaritan woman at the well is a case in point. The woman was a Samaritan, and she knew when she saw Jesus that He was a Jew, one with whom her people would have nothing to do. It would have been useless trying to make her respond to His teaching until her basic antagonism had been broken down, which He proceeded to do. His first step was to ask her politely and simply for a drink of water. The woman was amazed at His request, and immediately her interest was aroused. She realized that He was different from others of His race, and that He was not bowed down by the prejudices of so many.

The authority of the teacher also needs to be established. This is especially necessary if the student is to accept guidance from his teacher. Jesus established His authority with all of His students. When it was time for Him to guide them, even in things they did not want to do, they were willing to follow Him. Jesus' relationship with His pupils meant that they accepted Him fully, but of course it involved more than their acceptance of His authority. They were brought to saving faith in Him.

Jesus was also careful to establish and maintain right relationships between members of His "class." This was no easy task, considering the differences in the natures of the men themselves. He urged them to "love one another," even as He had loved them. They argued about such matters as which of them would be the greatest after Jesus died, and He had to impress on them a new standard, that of humility. They were greatly influenced by His own example of love and humility, which we will also discuss later in this paper. Forgiveness is essential between the class-members. Peter thought that forgiving a brother seven times was generous, but Jesus taught him that that was not enough. Rather, we should be willing to forgive seventy times seven. By insisting on forgiveness, Jesus laid a sure foundation for proper relationships. This is still very applicable today. Even when another member of the class is obviously in the wrong, the approach should be on the basis of brotherly interest. This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 18, 15-17. Jesus encouraged his pupils to talk the matter over among themselves, in person to person discussions. Such teachings of love, humility, forgiveness, and brotherly interest will help maintain right relationships in the classrooms of today, too.

III. Control and Discipline in Jesus' Classroom

A teacher may know all the theory about understanding his pupils. He may know that certain attitudes and relationships should be established, but that teacher cannot be successful if he is unable to control and guide his class. He himself must demonstrate the personal qualities necessary to maintain order in the class. Such qualities are the ability to capture and maintain interest, patience and self-control, dignity, the ability to lead, giving the pupil recognition, and the ability to exercise discipline and correction.

Jesus was a Master at capturing interest. He knew how to establish points of contact. We can see this in the calling of Nathanael. Nathanael did not believe that anything good could come out of Nazareth to say nothing of the Messiah, the promised Savior. Where did Jesus establish His point of contact and capture Nathanael's attention? "Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, He said of him, "Here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.'" Jesus was undoubtedly interesting to His pupils. We will see the "tools" He used later in this paper, when we examine His use of symbols, the concrete to explain the abstract, His use of stories and parables, His use of Scripture, etc. as well as His visual aids and "activity methods." His classes were always under control because He was able to maintain His pupils' interest in His

lesson. They never quite knew what was coming next. There was often a sense of anticipation, and of pleasurable association as His teaching proceeded from a basis which they could understand to the new or unknown. Even His enemies were amazed at His answers and paid attention to His words.

Jesus also displayed patience and self-control to perfection. He was patient with James and John, even when the other disciples were annoyed because they asked for special places in His kingdom. Jesus went to the root of their problem where others would have quickly condemned them. Jesus was patiently ready to meet all situations, many and varied as they were. He did not treat the Samaritan woman at the well in the same way as He did Nicodemus; nor did He deal with the unbelieving Pharisees as He did with His own disciples. His approach was varied according to the particular need, but He was always patient. We never find Jesus flustered. No matter how difficult the situation, He was always in control, even when rebuking or correcting. Even when He was on trial before Pilate, He was so self-controlled that it almost seemed as though Pilate was the one on trial. Jesus lived His teachings. It was not a case of “Do as I say, not as I do.” When Jesus said, “Love your enemies,” He lived it. On the cross He prayed for those who were crucifying Him.

Jesus was approachable, always ready to help His pupils, and even His private time was at their disposal. Yet He was never undignified. Wherever He taught, whatever the circumstances, He was always dignified. There was no slovenliness in His dress or preparation. His orderliness was apparent to all. There was even dignity when he passed the sop to Judas or washed His disciples’ feet.

The ability to lead in Jesus is vividly apparent. He was the Shepherd, His students were the sheep. He led them; He did not drive them. His students preferred to follow Him, content to learn from Him, respecting His judgment. When Jesus asked the twelve disciples if they wanted to leave Him, what was Peter’s reply? How wonderful to have such a relationship with our students!

The pupil is important. We dare never forget that. Jesus did not. Every one of His pupils mattered to Him and they knew it. He made it apparent to them that they were important as individuals. He commended His students. Think of Mary of Bethany when Judas criticized her for “wasting” her money on Jesus. Classroom control is more effective when pupils know that their efforts are appreciated. Jesus was always quick to commend a right motive. The widow’s gift of two mites and the publican’s prayer in the temple clearly demonstrate that it was quality not quantity that mattered to Jesus. Jesus let no effort go unnoticed.

Jesus also exercised discipline in His “classes.” If anyone wanted to be His disciple, he would have to recognize and accept Jesus’ authority as absolute. Jesus used many methods of discipline and correction with His students. The method Jesus would use was determined by the situation and those involved. It could be a discerning silence as with the woman taken in adultery, a penetrating look as with Peter, a gentle rebuke as when Philip said, “Show us the Father and that will be enough for us,” a scorching word as, “Out of My sight, Satan,” physical action as when Jesus cleansed the temple. Each method had its place and was used wisely and effectively. Even as Jesus corrected His pupils He was still the Master Teacher, always in control of the situation and the class.

IV. The Simplicity of Jesus’ Style

Jesus’ excellent teaching method is seen in His simplicity, and that is one reason why we read in Mark 12,37 that “the large crowd (of common people) listened to Him with delight.” As teachers, we need to be aware always of the necessity to use language understood by our hearers. There will be new terminology that our students will need to learn, but our basic language of communication should be as straight-forward as the lesson material allows.

Jesus worked in a carpenter’s shop, as He was growing up, coming in constant contact with “ordinary” men and women. He understood them thoroughly, and was known as one of them, speaking their language. In His public ministry, He spoke with a refreshing simplicity, and though His listeners might not understand all that His lesson implied, they could go away with something to consider. Jesus reached people at their level of understanding.

In His teaching Jesus made use of everyday problems and needs. In this way He was able to capture people’s attention and make His application to everyday living. People often came to Jesus with a problem or a

need. Think of the man sick of the palsy or the woman with the issue of blood or Jairus' daughter. Consider the rich, young ruler who wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life or the Pharisees who wanted to know if they should pay taxes to Caesar. Sometimes Jesus posed the problem. For example, when the man sick of the palsy was brought to Him, he posed this problem: "Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'" (Mark 2,9) With this method Jesus would proceed from the problem to the solution to action. Let us examine the case of the rich, young ruler: the problem – "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"; the solution – "Obey the commandments... go, sell your possessions and give to the poor,..."; what action was Jesus looking for?

Often Jesus' words contained symbolic meaning. He was simple and direct. His illustrations were meaningful, because He used the familiar to explain the new or unfamiliar – the concrete to explain the abstract. He used birds and lilies to explain trust in God. He used the wind to describe the Holy Spirit (which was also a play on words). He used grapes and figs to illustrate fruitful discipleship. Jesus deliberately took these things that his pupils would understand and applied spiritual truths to them. There was simplicity and profound depth both in Jesus' use of symbols. Think of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' use of salt and light. We should never try to teach the abstract without attaching it to the concrete.

One of the most outstanding features of the methods of Jesus as Teacher is that He told stories. He was a Master at it. He was able to hold people's attention, almost entertain, if you would, and yet teach such profound spiritual truths. Jesus' frequent method of storytelling was the parable. Our familiar definition is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." It can also be described as a comparison between familiar facts and spiritual truths. This description would allow you to include metaphors and similes as parables. A metaphor is a picture whereby something is described by calling it something else. Jesus called Herod "a fox." A simile is a comparison introduced by the words like or as. Jesus described His love for the people of Jerusalem with a simile: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I would have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

If story-telling is a craft, Jesus was the Master Craftsman. His stories and parables were well within the comprehension of His hearers. This is the first essential in story-telling. Not only were His illustrations full of meaning, but He was also very interesting, and He told them in a gripping way. He used imagery that appealed to the imagination, giving his pupils something to see with their mind's eye or hear with the mind's ear. In studying Jesus' parables and stories we can see many qualities of His craft. They were concise. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard takes sixteen verses; the story of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple is told in six verses; the illustration of the Good Shepherd occupies only eight verses; and the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus takes thirteen verses. Christ's stories also had an interesting and vivid beginning. His pictures of words were gems of imagery, able to fire the imagination immediately. The parts follow logically, so that His hearers have no trouble following the story line. These stories are easily remembered and easily told to others. The teacher who learns this art will greatly benefit many students.

Jesus also made frequent use of the Scriptures. He knew them and so did His pupils. After all, it was the Scriptures that gave witness to Jesus as the Christ. It goes without saying that as teachers we should employ the Scriptures and teach our students how to read as well as interpret Scripture. Remember: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." Jesus often used familiar Scripture to explain the less familiar – letting Scripture interpret Scripture. Scripture should provide more than just the story line for our teaching. Make use of all of Scripture from all portions of the Bible. The Bible is a unit – the central theme – the thread that runs throughout is Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrated that in His teaching, let us also.

It was characteristic of Jesus to make use of the occasion as it arose. This is one of the reasons for the vitality of His teaching. When a situation would arise involving Himself or His pupils, He would use it to teach a Scriptural truth. When His disciples were accused of working on the Sabbath and breaking the Sabbath Law by threshing wheat, Jesus used the occasion to instruct the Pharisees on the real intention of the Sabbath Law. When the woman anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee and Jesus was criticized for permitting such a sinful woman to touch Him, He used the occasion to teach on forgiveness. Do you make use of occasions

as they arise in your classroom to teach your students spiritual truths? Look for them, be aware of them, and make use of them.

By using symbols and storytelling, parables and Scripture, and occasions, Jesus was making use of apperception. Apperception is using the familiar or the old to explain and interpret the unknown or new. It is only common sense in teaching to state what we want our students to learn in such way that they can easily connect up with what the students already have in mind. In justifying His disciples in threshing wheat on the Sabbath, he put their critics in mind of what David did and the priests do on the Sabbath day as the basis for apperceiving what the disciples did. When preparing a new lesson, it's always good to recall what your students already know and build on that in teaching them something new.

Along the same lines, Jesus also made use of repetition in teaching His disciples. Jesus would often repeat some of His lessons as He proceeded from the known to the unknown, and thus He impressed His new teachings on His pupils. Lessons need to be emphasized, re-explained, and repeated until students have grasped the principles involved. How often did Jesus teach about being prepared for His coming? How many times did He instruct His disciples concerning His passion, death, and resurrection? Starting off your class with a review or allowing time for a review at the end of a section will aid your students in retaining the precious truths you have taught them. It is worth repeating.

Another literary tool Jesus liked to employ was the use of contrast. He would place opposites over against each other, e.g. light and dark, true and false, old and new, etc. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus used contrast very effectively: "You have heard that it was said to people long ago...But I tell you..." Many of the parables are rich in contrast – the two sons, the Good Samaritan, wise and foolish virgins, etc. The use of contrast can be a great aid in teaching. It has a pictorial quality and so appeals to the imagination, and is likewise an aid to attention and memory.

After studying Jesus literary style we have to be impressed with the great qualities the Master Teacher displayed. He was simple, yet profound and used symbolism that effectively conveyed His meaning. By His delightful choice of language He revealed God to men in words they could understand. As He taught profound truths about difficult subjects, He did so in such a way that they became clear and straightforward. As we have seen, "all...were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips," and "the large crowd (of common people) listened to Him with delight."

V. Jesus' Use of Visual Aids and Activity Methods

Many of Jesus' lessons centered about actual objects. Therefore, it was only natural for Jesus to make use of them in leading His students from the known to the unknown, from the old to the new. Jesus' method of taking known things and giving them a new spiritual significance was novel to His hearers, and so interest was aroused and maintained. When He was asked concerning the payment of taxes, He asked for a coin. We can imagine the intense interest at this novel turn of events and sense the hush as He asked for and received the coin. On another occasion Jesus wanted to impress on His disciples the need for true humility, so he placed a little child in their midst and used him as an object lesson.

Jesus often used the actual surroundings of the moment as a teaching medium. He used the sea on more than one occasion to teach a lesson to fishermen. He used water as a visual aid with the woman at the well. He used a fig tree to teach about the coming of the Kingdom of God.

We have already seen one use of people as a visual aid with the young child. We can also think of the widow and her two mites, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, or the man who wanted Jesus to decide on his inheritance.

Miracles provided Jesus with a very unique visual aid. This aid, of course, is not at our disposal today. His provision of material things miraculously demonstrated His deity in very vivid fashion changing water into wine, the great catch of fish, the feeding of the five thousand, etc. He used the healing of the paralytic to demonstrate His power to forgive sins. He also used His miracles as a visual aid to expose false teaching such as the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day. He used the withering of a fig-tree that He had cursed to teach about fruitless living.

He even used Himself as a visual aid. He taught His disciples how to pray by His life of prayer. He taught His disciples about humility by washing their feet. He taught His disciples about loving enemies by asking His Father to forgive the men who were crucifying Him.

There was no lack of visual aids in Jesus' teaching repertory. He used visual aids to impress His lesson on His students in very vivid fashion. He had amazing capacity to utilize the happening of the moment, or the back round, or even people, as telling visual aids. He demonstrated the effective use of visual aids – not just as an interesting thing to look at, but as something very relevant to the lesson He was teaching. He Himself was His own greatest visual aid. May we follow His example in using visual aids as an effective teaching tool.

In addition to visual aids Jesus also used “activity methods.” Activity methods are those things which allow students to participate actively in their own learning, in the mental as well as the physical realm. In other words, this is learning by doing. Activity was an essential part of Jesus' teaching methods. Very often He demanded physical participation. He asked His pupils to do things, to put their lessons into practice. “Come, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” “Go and make disciples of all nations.” On two separate occasions Jesus sent His disciples out on missionary journeys without Him. Students cannot learn in a vacuum, just as you cannot learn to fly an airplane in a classroom. We need to teach our children how to apply the lessons we teach them in their everyday lives. We need to teach them how to live their lessons – how to live their faith.

VI. Jesus Used Questions as a Teaching Method

The four gospels record over 100 different questions that Jesus asked during His ministry. The questions always flowed, related to the lesson, beautifully appropriate for the particular student being dealt with. Both the question and the answer were consistently built into the very fabric of the lesson. His responses were not merely, “That's right.”

Jesus often used “point of contact” questions to break the ice in order to begin a conversation or a lesson. An example of this type of question can be seen outside the tomb of Jesus when He asked Mary Magdalene: “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” A contact was made and from that Jesus was able to lead Mary to see Him not as a gardener, but as the resurrected Christ. The point of contact question had helped in the re-establishment of the Teacher-pupil relationship. Another way Jesus used this type of question was by introducing a story with a question. On one occasion when the Pharisees and Scribes were murmuring because He was prepared to eat with sinners, Jesus explained His actions by telling the story of the lost sheep: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” The question was the point of contact and was an effective introduction to a lesson explaining His attitude toward “sinners.”

Another important function of the question is to arouse interest, and once interest is aroused it is the teacher's task to guide the thinking processes of his pupils. This can be seen in the questions Jesus asked. Jesus asked two questions in regard to his healing of the paralytic. The first contact question was: “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?” After the contact was made, Jesus could then lead the questioning in the direction He had planned. He followed up that first question with a second: “which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?” Jesus wanted them to realize that His power to restore the man's health was also a powerful argument as to His power to forgive sins. In this incident the two questions could have had their place in leading the Jews to a logical conclusion concerning the deity of Christ, but they rejected that conclusion.

Sometimes Jesus questions were rhetorical and needed no answer. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus asked many rhetorical questions: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?” “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” In these questions there was an implied challenge for the hearer himself to apply the teaching. Thought was directed, and there was a real stimulus to the learning processes of the hearers.

Some of Jesus' questions were actually examinations, and as such they were ideal as demonstrations of “activity methods” at their best, taking place in the natural setting of the lesson. An example of this was when

He asked Philip where they could buy bread for thousands of people gathered on the hillside. The Bible tells us that Jesus did this to test or prove Philip. Sometimes Jesus used this type of question to bring thinking to a logical conclusion, to determine if the previous lessons had been understood. “Who do you say that I am?” Another example can be seen on the shores of Galilee after the resurrection. “Simon son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?”

Jesus not only asked questions of His students, He also encouraged His students to ask questions. Students ask questions when they are interested. As long as a question is relevant it should not be discouraged. This also lets the child know that his teacher is approachable and interested in him as an individual. After Jesus had finished teaching on forgiveness, one of his students, Peter, asked about how often he should forgive his brother. Peter wondered how far he was to apply Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness. Jesus used his question as a new starting point. The lesson on forgiveness was not complete until that question had been asked, then answered, with a telling illustration and an apt, all-inclusive application. The disciples often asked questions about Jesus’ parables, cf. Parable of sower and seed, parable of weeds. Jesus welcomed all of their questions. He knew that questions showed His pupils’ interest in His lessons, and He encouraged that. He never embarrassed anyone who had a genuine difficulty. A question asked was the starting point for further instruction.

Jesus used the question as an effective teaching method. Contact questions, rhetorical questions, questions answered by another question, examination questions, and even the questions asked by His pupils were put to use. Through them the Master Teacher stimulated thought, guided learning, and challenged His pupils to believe and do.

Summary

Jesus was the Master Craftsman as a Teacher. He displayed a wide range of methods of presentation. His language was simple, yet profound, vivid, yet complex, appreciated by the common people, yet confusing to the religious teachers and leaders of His day. His symbolism contained spiritual teaching which could be more fully understood if the listeners would meditate on the lesson. He gave them something to take home.

His use of visual aids was astonishingly “modern,” even the surrounding and the people of the moment became a form of visual demonstration for Him. His miracles also accorded him a unique visual aid. He Himself ways a constant Visual Aid to His pupils. He lived what He taught. there was no inconsistency between His words and His life.

His use of questions – the many types at his disposal – even further proved that He was and is the *Master Teacher of All Time*. May we all learn from Him and so enrich our teaching skills for the benefit of our students and their soul’s nourishment.