

The Master Teacher

by Harris Franklin Rall

Jesus' teaching is a powerful and enduring message that conveys spiritual truths through everyday examples and parables, emphasizing the importance of living a life of faith and trust in God.

Scripture: Matthew 5:38, Matthew 12:6, Mark 4:1, Luke 10:29, Luke 15:11

Topics: "Jesus Teachings", "Christian Principles"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches about Jesus as a teacher, emphasizing his unwavering commitment to teaching throughout his ministry, from his interactions with crowds to his devoted disciples. Jesus' teaching style is marked by freedom, authority, and occasional yet vital and practical lessons that address the real needs of people. He used common, everyday life situations to convey profound spiritual truths, employing likenesses, examples, and parables to illustrate Christian principles and the nature of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Transcript

It is as a teacher first of all that Jesus appears in his ministry. He began his work in this manner, and neither success nor defeat turned him aside from this course. When the crowds left him he devoted himself to his disciples, but his work was still that of teaching. It is as a teacher in the temple that he spends his last days at Jerusalem, making a final appeal to the people. His last night is given to his disciples in instruction.

The parable of the sower sets forth Jesus' faith as a teacher, which he passes on to the disciples for their encouragement (Mark 4:1-9). He was like one with good seed, scattering it wherever he went. He saw the hard hearts upon which it fell in vain, and the shallow hearts of those who responded with quick enthusiasm only to turn as quickly away. None of these things moved him. He knew that there was life in the seed, in his message, and that it was his work to sow; and he saw the future harvest of thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. Jesus wrote no book. He established no church, and we have no record that he gave orders for its establishment. He was a sower. He scattered his living words constantly, prodigally. He gave them forth to all men, on all occasions, to eager throngs in Galilee, to hostile crowds at Jerusalem, to his little company of followers, to children in the market place, to folks met casually by the wayside. Only a few comparatively have come down to us, but they have justified his faith. These words, flung out upon the air like scattered seed, have lived on in the hearts of men and the lives of nations to comfort, to guide, to cast down, to lift up, to transform. And never before have they been so closely studied, so widely spread, or so

mighty in their influence as today.

The first mark of Jesus' teaching is its freedom and authority. It is truth welling up directly from life. That is seen not merely in Jesus' attitude toward tradition, but toward the Old Testament as well. These Scriptures were indeed part of his inner life. In his moments of deepest need, in the wilderness temptation and on the cross, their words come to his lips. He quoted them too as authority against his foes. And yet back of this we find an attitude of independence and sometimes of criticism. There are several ways in which this attitude appears: (1) Jesus was not simply dependent upon the Old Testament. He proclaimed the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; but this was a living God, and Jesus saw him in the world and knew him in his own life, and therefore was not limited to the record of the past. (2) Jesus did not take from the Old Testament indifferently; he discriminated and chose. He preferred the prophetic writings, especially the second part of Isaiah, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms. There were large portions which he left wholly to one side. (3) He set scripture against scripture. He went back of the Mosaic law of divorce (Deut 24:1) to assert a higher law that was at the beginning (Mark 10:2-12). (4) He definitely set aside, upon his own authority, certain Old Testament precepts or laws. "Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil" (Matt 5:38, 39). In his own practice he disregarded ceremonial laws, and not merely those of the rabbis but of the Old Testament also. When called to account he simply declared, that it was not what went into a man's body but what came out of his heart that made him unclean (Mark 7:1-23). By this word he calmly set aside entire sections of the law which the people regarded as holy and unchangeable. And the evangelist points out this conclusion (Mark 7:19). (5) Finally, he recognized that a new day had come with him. He revered the old, but a better was now at hand; "one greater than the temple is here" (Matt 12:6). The new wine had come; why should it be put in the old wine-skins that could no longer hold it? If the old forms interfere with the new spirit, let the old forms drop off (Mark 2:18-22). That, indeed, was what Jesus did. He did not argue against the old. He simply let it slough off.

One passage in Matthew seems to contradict this interpretation (5:17-20). There Jesus seems to assert that every least letter of the law must stand forever. Against Jesus' clear and consistent teaching and conduct this cannot stand. Verses 18 and 19 may have been inserted, as some think. There is a more probable interpretation: that Jesus had been criticized as one who was destroying all law and overturning all authority, that he responded by saying: "You are the destroyers of the law, not I. I am fulfilling it by standing for its real spirit. There is not one truth that I am overturning. But unless your righteousness exceeds that of the letter, you shall never enter the Kingdom."

Jesus' method of teaching was not systematic but occasional. He was not a college professor lecturing upon his subject, taking up one doctrine after another. He walked through the world of men and brought the truth to men as he saw their need. He saw men anxious and troubled, and showed them the birds and the flowers for which God was caring (Matt 6:25-34), but he never sat down to give his disciples a lecture upon the divine immanence or providence. Two of his disciples came with their petty ambitions; he made it the occasion for his great lesson on the meaning of life as a chance to give, not to get (Matt 20:20-28). Jesus' teaching was vital, practical. He was interested in life, not in ideas (Luke 13:1-5).

The materials for his teaching Jesus took from the life of the people to whom he spoke. He was popular in the best sense of the word. In pedagogical wisdom he was a teacher of the highest order. He spoke the language that people knew. He took their common world and made it teach his highest lessons. All the life of that day looks out upon us from his pages. We see the world of nature: the glowing sunset that promises fair weather, the red of the morning that suggests the storm, the lightning that flashes from end

to end of heaven, the bright flowers and the quickly fading grass, the slow-growing grain, the field where wheat and tares are mixed together, the fig tree showing its first tender green, the vineyard ready for the gathering, and the bending heads of the rich harvest that promises its hundredfold. We see the living creatures: the birds that have their nests, the foxes with their holes, the carrion birds gathering where the carcass is, the hungry flock settling down on the new-sown field, the little dead sparrow whom God notices, though men do not. We see men busy at their daily tasks: the farmer, the merchant, the landowner, the judge. How many different characters he shows us!--the poor widow and the unjust judge, the faithful shepherd, the poor beggar, the successful farmer whom Jesus brands as fool. No pictures are more suggestive than those that show us the home and the children: the mother kneading her dough, the windowless house where you must search long for your lost coin, the closed house where the father and children are in bed, the picture of the children about the table with the dogs underneath, the evening hour with the lamp upon the stand giving light to all in the house. And the children! We see them busily playing their games of funeral or wedding as they might today, or coming hungry to their father, sure that they will get bread and not a stone, or placed once more by Jesus in the midst to preach the great lesson of the open, trustful heart. There are shadows too: the laborers that wait in the market place and have no one to hire them, that toil all day and then must serve their master at night before they can eat, or that feel the cruel scourge for some misdeed, the beggar lying at the gate while the feast goes on within, the debtor on his way to prison, the criminal bearing his own cross to the place of execution.

Such teaching was of the highest effectiveness. It comes to us, indeed, from another world and a long-past age, yet so simple is its form and so human the relations it uses that every age since then has heard it as its own. There are vivid pictures, pregnant phrases, that have long since passed into common speech: salt of the earth, whited sepulchers, wolves in sheep's clothing, grapes from thorns, the house divided against itself. Jesus is an artist. There is a beauty in these words that neither the years of verbal tradition nor the loss through translation has destroyed. In beauty of phrase, in economy of line, in their picture language, and, above all, in the perfection of their thought, we have here poetry and painting at its highest. There is a finality of form which marks the highest art. And yet we hardly dare to use that word, which suggests effort and thought of effect, for everything here is free, natural, spontaneous.

We have already seen how much of Jesus' teaching is figurative, and how he takes it from the life all about him. He took this common world which men knew and made them see the spiritual truths about which they were so blind. We may distinguish three forms in this picture teaching of Jesus: likenesses, examples, and parables.

First come the likenesses. Often the comparison is implied, not expressed. "Ye are the salt of the earth." "Ye are the light of the world." "A city set on a hill cannot be hid." "No man putteth new wine into old wine-skins." "Do men gather grapes of thorns?" Sometimes the comparison is stated, as in the picture of the perverse children. He found people like some children at play. Their comrades propose that they play wedding, and begin to pipe, but they do not want to play wedding and so will not dance to the music. And when their friends offer to play funeral and start to wailing, instead of beating their breasts and playing mourner they refuse this game also. John came as an ascetic; they would not hear him but said, "He has a demon." Jesus came and joined in all the life of men; him too they would not hear, he was a glutton and winebibber (Matt II. 16-19).

The examples form another class. These are usually classed with the parables. They are really impressive illustrations setting forth some Christian principle. There are four of these: The good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37); the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14); the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21); and Dives and

Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

The parables form the third class. The parable is an invented tale like a fable, except that the parable is something that might naturally happen. There are no talking animals in a parable as in the fables of Æsop. The purpose of the parable is to persuade or explain. It may be defined as an argument or explanation from analogy, in which a natural happening in a lower sphere is made to show the truth in a higher sphere. The parable of the prodigal son is such an argument. Jesus tells the story of a father who forgives the returning son that has done wrong, instead of casting him out. Men could understand and appreciate this incident. Jesus transfers it to a higher realm and says: That is the way with our Father in heaven.

Few parts of the teaching of Jesus have been more misused than the parables. The common mistake has been to treat them as if they were allegories. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* we have good examples of the allegory. An allegory is an extended simile. Every figure or character in the allegory represents some spiritual fact or truth. It is like two lines running parallel with point corresponding to point. The parable is like two curves which touch at only one point; it is an argument usually meant to prove or illustrate just one thing. The parable of the prodigal son proves one truth--God is merciful as the best fathers of earth are. It is a mistake, then, to use it as is commonly done to prove a hundred other points, to find some hidden spiritual meaning in the swine and the husks and the strangers, the robe, the ring, the shoes, and all the rest.

The other mistake that has been made in interpreting the teaching of Jesus has been the attempt to make of it a set of rules or laws. Jesus had no thought of bringing laws to men. His whole teaching is a protest against a religion of laws. He was interested in the life of men, in leading men into the rich life with God which he himself possessed. To this end his teachings are designed to stir repentance, to quicken desire, to bring a higher vision, to lead men to decision for God and to trust in him. Like a good physician, he does not prescribe the same for every man. He calls Levi to follow him, but the Gadarene demoniac who wanted to follow him he sends to his home. Zacchæus and Lazarus may keep their home and their wealth; the rich young ruler he bids sell all and follow him.

Directions for Reading and Study

Mark 2:18-22; 4:1-9; 7:1-23; 10:2-12; Matt 5:17-48.

Using the marginal references of the Standard Revision, make a list of Old Testament quotations and allusions found in the account of the temptation and in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the first five instances of likenesses given in this chapter, write out the comparison in full.

What is the religious principle illustrated in the four examples given above.

Give the argument or analogy of the parables found in the following passages: Matt 7:24-27; 13:44; 25:14-30.

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