

Discipling Through Metaphor



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Sam. 12:1–7, Isa. 28:24–28, Matt. 7:24–27, 13:1–30, Luke 20:9–19.

Memory Text: “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world’ ” (Matthew 13:34, 35, NIV).

Christianity is reasonable and logical. Intellect should be cultivated. Intellect alone, however, insufficiently expresses the complete human personality. Unlike robots, which are programmed to process reason and logic, humans are capable of loving, feeling, hurting, crying, caring, laughing, and imagining. Thus, Jesus framed eternal truths in ways that went beyond mere intellect alone. Jesus spoke through concrete pictures drawn from everyday life in order to reach people where they were. Children and adults could understand deep truths delivered through parables wrapped in images and metaphors.

Meanwhile, complex concepts such as justification, righteousness, and sanctification were easily grasped through the Master Storyteller's art. In other words, concepts that are often difficult to grasp in ordinary language can be taught through symbols and metaphors.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 11.

Old Testament Examples

Read 2 Samuel 12:1–7, Isaiah 28:24–28, Jeremiah 13:12–14, and Ezekiel 15:1–7. How do these parables and allegories expand our understanding of God’s relationship with humankind? Which objects or settings utilized by these prophets later appear in Christ’s parables?

As we can see, Nathan tells a parable in order to disguise the real purpose of his visit. David implicates himself as the transgressor, thereby pronouncing his own sentence. Using a literary device (a parable), Nathan accomplishes something that otherwise might have produced confrontation and, perhaps, even execution (his own!).

Isaiah’s poetic story draws from the agricultural background familiar to his listeners. Centuries later, Jesus would employ those same settings. Isaiah’s parable teaches about God’s unlimited mercy during times of punishment. The twelfth chapter of Hebrews likewise understands God’s punishments as tools for correction rather than weapons for vengeance. Divine punishments reflected their redemptive purposes; they were sufficient to encourage repentance, revival, and reformation. Nevertheless, when greater stubbornness and rebellion occurred, greater punishments followed.

Jeremiah’s parable is a terrifying illustration of judgment. Whenever human beings frustrate God’s redemptive purpose, God eventually releases them to the consequences that they have chosen. Christ likewise shares judgment parables with His listeners. Ezekiel uses a different symbol to convey a similar message.

What is it about storytelling that makes it such a powerful way to express truth? What are some of your favorite stories, and why do you like them? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Architectural Wisdom

Read Matthew 7:24–27. What do these verses contribute to our understanding of Christian discipleship? Why do you think Jesus used this example from nature to teach such a crucial truth?

Modern literate societies take literacy for granted. However, even today, numerous nonliterate societies exist. Throughout ancient history, literacy was the exception rather than the rule. Ruling classes and literary specialists (scribes) obtained their power through their skill in reading. Thus, Jesus framed His messages within forms that everyday, nonliterate people could understand. (Obviously, literate listeners could also understand them.)

Prior to Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, manuscripts, in most places in the world, were handwritten—a time-consuming process. Relatively few could afford to obtain such valuable commodities. Therefore, oral communication through legends, parables, and similar devices became the standard for the conveyance of information.

God offers salvation for the entire human race. Should it be surprising, then, that Christ used forms of communication that could reach the greatest number of people? Oral tradition, transferred from generation to generation through simple stories, became the currency of redemptive thought.

Read Luke 14:27–33. What lessons can we glean from these stories? How do the metaphors here illuminate our understanding of discipleship?

Building entails preparation. Cost estimates are developed long before actual construction commences. Discipleship likewise involves preparation. Miraculous feedings, spectacular healings, and apparent success could lead prospective disciples to assume that following Jesus was easy. Jesus encouraged His listeners, however, to study the complete picture. Self-sacrifice, suffering, humiliation, and rejection constituted considerable costs. Notice once again that Jesus chose to convey this message using metaphorical language when He could have just offered a checklist of specific drawbacks that His disciples might encounter.

Agricultural Analogies

Read Matthew 13:1–30. What was Jesus teaching His audience about discipleship? What lessons can modern Christians derive from these metaphors?

Christ’s parable of the sower is familiar to many readers. The setting for the story was commonplace for an agrarian society, something to which Jesus’ listeners could easily relate. The connection with discipleship is obvious. Essentially Jesus is challenging His listeners to evaluate their standing as disciples. Rather than confronting each individual specifically, He speaks through parables, inviting disciples to confront themselves. Looking into their soul’s mirror, they can evaluate their materialistic tendencies, review their capacity for perseverance, analyze their worldly entanglements, and choose the lifestyle of uncompromising discipleship.

At the same time, true discipleship places judgment (condemnation) in the hands of the Master, not those of the disciple. Human discernment is incomplete, human knowledge partial. God alone possesses faultless understanding. Jesus warns, too, that satanic infiltration does happen. Disciples cannot surrender their judgment (discernment) to other professed believers because these believers may be weeds, not wheat. Both grow together until harvesttime.

“In Christ’s parable teaching the same principle is seen as in His own mission to the world. That we might become acquainted with His divine character and life, Christ took our nature and dwelt among us. Divinity was revealed in humanity; the invisible glory in the visible human form. Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 17.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus talked about the “deceitfulness of riches.” What was He talking about? How can “riches” deceive even those who don’t have them?

The Revolutionary's War

Christ's ministry was revolutionary but without common weapons. His tools were infinitely more powerful than were swords or knives. Life-changing words, frequently expressed through parables and metaphors, became His not-so-secret weapons in the fight against evil.

Christ's tactics and strategies caught many leaders off guard; they were ill-equipped to counter the power of His appeal to the masses. Many of His parables contained messages that worked against the leaders. The religious leaders rightly saw that their influence would be largely curtailed wherever Christ's message penetrated the people's hearts.

Read Matthew 21:28–32 and Luke 14:16–24, 20:9–19. What powerful messages come through these parables? Though the parables were often directed to specific people, what principles here apply to us, no matter who we are?

“The parable of the vineyard applies not alone to the Jewish nation. It has a lesson for us. The church in this generation has been endowed by God with great privileges and blessings, and He expects corresponding returns.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 296.

No question, we have been greatly blessed by the Lord: redeemed by the blood of Christ, promised salvation based on His righteousness (not our own), given the assurance of eternal life, and offered the Holy Spirit—we have been provided with so much. It is easy, however, to forget all that we have, to take it for granted, or to even scoff at it. Like the vinedressers in the parable, we might not even realize the implications of that which we are doing. In the end, their ignorance didn't excuse them on Judgment Day. It won't excuse us, either.

How often have you been deceived in the past about your own spiritual state? What have you learned from those experiences that could help you to avoid making the same mistakes again?

Christ’s Creative Legacy

After the record of Christ’s ministry is completed, the telling of parables seems to have disappeared from Scripture. What explains this phenomenon? Certainly, the largest remaining segment of the New Testament centers around Paul. Fourteen New Testament books have been attributed to Paul, and nearly half of Luke’s historical narrative in Acts revolves almost exclusively around Paul, as well. Though he didn’t use stories in the way that Jesus did, Paul still made considerable use of metaphors, similes, and other creative devices (*see Rom. 7:1–6, 1 Cor. 3:10–15, 2 Cor. 5:1–10*). Though Paul was no storyteller, his presentations were neither boring nor without color. Stylistic differences between Christ’s public discourse and Paul’s obviously exist, but both exhibit considerable expressive creativity.

Other New Testament writers demonstrate a somewhat closer affinity to Christ’s use of parables. Jesus’ brother James wrote, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring” (*James 2:2, NIV*) to begin a narrative lesson. Yet, neither Christ’s brother nor any other disciple utilized stories as extensively as did Christ. Simile and symbolism, however, are widespread. “He will pass away like a wild flower” (*James 1:10, NIV*). “Take ships as an example” (*James 3:4, NIV*). Peter’s vision (*Acts 10*) assumed symbolic form. Symbolic narratives shape significant portions of the book of Revelation. “When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman” (*Rev. 12:13, NIV*).

Select a couple of the following texts and identify the metaphors within them. What are the various messages contained within these verses? What imagery is used to convey the message? *Acts 10:9–16, James 3:3–12, Rev. 12:7–17, 18:9–20, 19:11–16.*

However they are expressed, the principle remains the same: metaphors, similes, parables, allegories, and other examples of creative language enable us to communicate in an understandable manner. Building upon the listener’s experiences, Christ and His disciples used comparisons and illustrations that stimulated an understanding of truth. We should, when appropriate, not be afraid to do the same.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Teaching in Parables,” pp. 17–27, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“Jesus desired to awaken inquiry. He sought to arouse the careless, and impress truth upon the heart. Parable teaching was popular, and commanded the respect and attention, not only of the Jews, but of the people of other nations. . . .

“Again, Christ had truths to present which the people were unprepared to accept or even to understand. For this reason also He taught them in parables. By connecting His teaching with the scenes of life, experience, or nature, He secured their attention and impressed their hearts. Afterward, as they looked upon the objects that illustrated His lessons, they recalled the words of the divine Teacher. . . .

“Jesus sought an avenue to every heart. By using a variety of illustrations, He not only presented truth in its different phases, but appealed to the different hearers.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 20, 21.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, share your answer to Sunday’s question. What can you learn from each other’s stories?
- 2 Jesus used images and metaphors from things with which His hearers were very familiar. What could you use from your own culture that could help convey spiritual truths?
- 3 Though Jesus used metaphors from mostly agricultural settings, much of early Christianity was urban in nature. What “urban” images does one find in the writings of Paul or any of the other New Testament writers?
- 4 Think through the elements that make a good story. What are they? How do they work? How can we learn to use these elements in our witness?
- 5 Read Luke 16:19–31. What kind of story did Jesus use here? What lessons can we take from it about the use of fiction in the conveying of spiritual messages?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 13:34, 35*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that stories and illustrations are not just “filler” in a sermon or talk; they are often the vehicle through which truth is communicated.

Feel: Be inspired by the fact that Jesus was popular with His listeners because He knew how to tell a good story.

Do: Finish this sentence: “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” and use modern metaphors that communicate gospel values.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Stories Are More Easily Remembered Than Facts.

A Look at the stories Jesus told His followers. On what activities were many of them based?

B If you were assembling stories for a modern audience, what subjects would likely strike a chord?

II. Feel: Many of the Stories Jesus Told, Especially About Human Interaction, Are Just as Relevant Today as They Were 2,000 Years Ago.

A Why do stories like “The Good Samaritan” and “The Prodigal Son” still strike a chord with us today?

B Why do you think Jesus often left His stories open-ended?

C What advantage did Jesus have by making His stories deliberately ambiguous? What lesson is there for us?

III. Do: Want an Audience? Tell a Story.

A In a society awash with words—both in print and broadcast—how can we find an audience, and why?

B What is the most powerful story you can tell?

► **Summary:** In spite of our many technological advances, personal stories (in the form of movies, TV programs, books, magazines) are still the primary way of communicating values. Are we, as Christians, taking advantage of it?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 13:34, 35*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Jesus showed us the power of stories and parables in communicating to others the truth about His grace and love.

Just for Teachers: Our society has no shortage of media influences. But amid the cacophony of print, audio, visual, and Internet images, people still stop to listen to a good story. At its heart, the Bible is a collection of stories—stories about God’s interaction with His people, His peoples’ interaction with one another, and their interaction with “outsiders.” Jesus communicated effectively because He told stories so well. Indeed, some of His stories—“The Good Samaritan,” “The Prodigal Son,” “The Good Shepherd”—have universal appeal and are known by both religious and nonreligious people. Our challenge is to reach our society and make disciples. Even after more than two thousand years, that is still done quite effectively through the medium of stories and parables.

Opening Activity/Discussion: Stories resonate with people. They may be communicated orally or through movies, plays, novels, and other art forms.

For example, books such as Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and movies based on it, have spiritual themes such as Redemption and forgiveness throughout. The novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, which traces the struggle that people have with reconciling good and evil, is another example of a story being used to convey religious messages.

Ask the members of your class what book, movie, musical, oral story, or other narrative art form has had a spiritual effect on them because of its treatment of spiritual themes. Allow them to explain what effect it had.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Jesus was a master storyteller because He identified with His listeners. He knew what made them tick. The stories He told about farmers, fishermen, housekeepers, parents, and their children were stories with which most people could easily identify.

Bible Commentary

Stories are effective vehicles for communication.

I. Making a Point Without Losing Your Life *(Review 2 Samuel 12:1–14 with your class.)*

Question: How do you correct a king (or boss, or spouse) while protecting your relationship (and your life)? Answer: Carefully.

David thought he had gotten away with murder (literally) when he got rid of Uriah so that he could marry Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. But while David and Bathsheba's secret may have been unknown to most people, it wasn't unknown to God. And God told His prophet, Nathan, to go and confront David.

Think of it: as king, David answered to no one; his power was absolute. Nathan could announce God's judgments all he wanted, but from a human point of view as a ruler, David was not obligated to listen to Nathan or even permit him to live.

But Nathan tells David's story by altering some of the facts and characters involved. It's still a story of greed and cruelty, but instead of a king it involves a rich man; instead of a wife, a sheep.

Of course, David's sense of outrage and moral indignation forces him to declare: " 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die!' " (*2 Sam. 12:5, NIV*).

Then still feeling the righteousness of his declaration, David hears Nathan say, " 'You are the man!' " (*vs. 7, NIV*). And before David knows what hit him, he finds himself caught in a trap from which he's unable to extricate himself.

Consider This: Not all stories are packed with so much power. But all stories are effective to the extent that they tap into our natural feelings of empathy for justice, mercy, love, and fair play. What stories—either factual or imagined—have had a profound influence on your life? What are those influences?

II. The Farmer, the Seed, and the Soil *(Review Matthew 13:1–23 with your class.)*

This is storytelling at its best. In a simple setting, well known to all His listeners, Jesus tells a story that engages His listeners on at least three levels.

First, there's the farmer. In an economy based on agriculture, it's fairly certain that most of Jesus' listeners would know a farmer, if they weren't farmers themselves. They knew what it meant to put a seed in

the ground and hope for the best. After all, there are no guarantees in farming. A farmer puts a seed in the ground, and anything that happens after that is beyond his control: weather, pests, blight, et cetera.

Then there's the seed. It has no control over where it lands. Its success is entirely at the mercy of the sower and of the ground on which it finds itself.

Finally, there's the ground. Some ground is hard, beaten down by foot traffic; some soil is shallow and rocky; some soil is prone to weeds; and some soil is good, fertile soil.

A good story engages people on more than one level. To identify with the farmer may mean, for example, that we make the most of limited resources; that we are judicious in the way that we scatter our "seed." To identify with the seed means that we are aware of the setting in which we're planted; that we know the challenges of being "planted" where conditions are perilous to our spiritual lives. To identify with the soil means that we understand our spiritual condition and try, with God's help, to ameliorate the natural conditions of our hearts—stony, weedy, well traveled, and beaten down—to make them more likely to be fertile ground that bears fruit for God's kingdom.

Consider This: What is this parable about? Discuss whether it is about the farmer, the seed, or the soil. At what level do the people who first heard this, as well as us today, engage in this story?

III. Open to Interpretation *(Review Matthew 21:28–32, Luke 14:16–24, and Luke 20:9–19 with your class.)*

A good story, parable, or analogy doesn't always neatly resolve its narrative situation.

Jesus almost always left the stories He told open-ended. The parable of "The Prodigal Son," for example, ends with the words " ' "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" ' " (*Luke 15:32, NIV*). Did the father persuade his older son to come inside and join the party? Or did the older son decide he could no longer live under the same roof with his younger, profligate brother? Jesus lets each listener fill in the blanks; He doesn't tell them how the story ends or what people should think about it.

The stories recorded in Matthew 21:28–32, Luke 14:16–24, and Luke 20:9–19 are clearly told by Jesus to describe the relationship that God had with His people, the Jews. He didn't say that in so many words, but the intent was clear: "the teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest [Jesus] immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them" (*Luke 20:19, NIV*).

Consider This: Stories, parables, and comparisons are not simply illustrations of the main message. Often they *are* the main message. What is the main message of Jesus' story in Matthew 21:28–32, and how does it describe the relationship between God and the people? Why do you think Jesus clothed truth in stories instead of speaking it plainly and undisguised?

Discussion Questions:

Outside church, where are you likely to hear stories or parables about life situations? What are such stories designed to do?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Life lessons can be found all around us. While some people have a knack for identifying spiritual applications in various life situations, for others it takes practice.

Life Application: If Jesus were on earth today, He would likely draw lessons from everyday situations with which we are familiar. Doubtless He might tell fewer stories about farmers and fishermen and more stories about professional athletes, public luminaries, and scientists or doctors.

- ❶ Why is it so important to “know your audience”?
- ❷ Who are some of the types of people with whom you try to share the gospel? How is your approach different for each group?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: While society still puts a premium on good stories, our society is infinitely more complex than the society with which Jesus communicated. For example, people nowadays have a much shorter attention span than people in Jesus' day, even than people did a decade ago.

Activity: On a flip chart or white board, if available, brainstorm about some of the ways that Christians, using modern media, can communicate biblical values. Identify some characteristics of such a message (such as its format and structure), the audience you hope to engage with it, and the result you hope to achieve.

As you discuss this idea, imagine that Jesus is in the room with you. How might He critique and challenge your ideas to be the best they can be? What suggestions do you think He might have to offer you?