

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?

Chipo's Choice

Chipo is ten years old and lives in southern Zambia. Her parents didn't practice any faith. But when her neighbors invited her to attend church with them, she went. She loved learning about God and went to church whenever she could.

But Chipo's father became angry when he learned that Chipo was attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church. "Stay away from that church," he warned her. "Or I will punish you." But Chipo loved Jesus and wanted to worship Him. So when her father wasn't home, she would go to church. Her father found out and punished her harshly.

But her father's punishment didn't keep Chipo from attending church and learning more about Jesus, who loves her. Almost every week, her father would punish her.

"Why do you keep going to church when Father punishes you?" Chipo's sister asked.

"God loves me, and I want to be His child," Chipo explained. The next Sabbath Chipo's sister went to church with her. When their father discovered that the girls had gone to church, he followed them and chased them home and punished them. Chipo's sister was afraid to attend church when their father was home, but Chipo went.

Chipo's mother asked Chipo why she continued going to church when her father punished her. "I've learned that Jesus loves me, and I love Jesus!" she added. The next week her mother went to church with Chipo. She wanted to see for herself what was so special. The pastor's sermon seemed to be just for her, and Chipo's mother decided to attend church again. When Chipo's father returned home, her mother told her husband what she had heard. She told him that she wanted to attend church again and invited him to go with her. He refused, but he allowed his wife and the girls to go. Chipo began praying that God would help her father want to join the family at church.

A few weeks later, Chipo's mother again invited her husband to go to church, and he went, though he didn't seem happy. But after church he apologized to Chipo and said he would attend church with the family. A few months later, Chipo's parents were baptized. Now instead of chasing her from the church, Chipo's father walks to church with her.

"God helped me to be faithful, even when Father punished me," Chipo said. "God helped me bring my whole family to Jesus."

Our faithfulness to God in worship, in prayer, and in giving our mission offerings, makes a difference in the lives of others. Thank you for giving to missions to reach others for Christ.