

“THE CHRIST OF THE VERBAL LAMPS”

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Mk. 4:23

If we were to search for a single sentence to sum up the public ministry of Jesus, I doubt if we could do better than that which is found in Matthew 4:23,

“And Jesus went about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and sickness among the people.”

Here we see him described as fulfilling a three-pronged mission: teacher, preacher and healer.

Three weeks ago we dealt with Jesus as the great physician in the fifth sermon of this series on the life of Christ entitled “The Christ of the Divinely Natural.”

Two weeks ago, we observed him as the master preacher when I preached “The Sermon on the Mount” for you.

We come now to a third function he filled, that of teacher. Our title for this ninth message in the series on The Greatest Life Ever Lived is, “The Christ of Verbal Lamps.” For our text we turn to the gospel of Mark, chapter four, and a fusion of verses two and thirty-four.

“He taught them many things in parables,” (and) “he did not speak to them without a parable.”

When I began the initial research for this particular series of sermons, I dug through more than 300 different subjects catalogued in my library and filing system, for information which would help me help you derive the greatest possible benefit from the stories he told.

Among the many helpful items I came across was a list of the world’s ten greatest teachers. At the top is Aristotle. Next comes Socrates, Newton and Plato. These are followed by Darwin, Pasteur, da Vinci, Shakespeare, Galileo and Einstein. Along the edge of the list I found a question which I had scrawled when I first filed the list away, “What about Jesus Christ?”

For you see, Jesus is by all odds the greatest teacher who ever lived. The influence of the men whose names appear on this list was limited. They were brilliant in certain areas of interest, but in terms of shaping men’s lives, or determining their destiny, or affecting the course of history itself, none can compare with the master teacher -- Jesus Christ.

As another quote puts it,

“Born in poverty and obscurity, cradled in a manger, reared as a laborer in a carpenter shop, without a recognized college education, he nevertheless gave to the world, while still a young man in his early thirties, a code of morality and a standard of life, the likes of which no generation of men has ever seen.

“After less than three years of teaching, he was put to death and his followers persecuted, scattered, burned at the stake, and killed in the arena. From this seemingly hopeless beginning, his teachings have spread until millions have enrolled as his students. They have dared to espouse the doctrines he taught at the cost of their lives, and the doctrines themselves have proved to be as high as the heavens and as enduring as the hills.”

As Jesus himself once said,

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”
(Mt. 24:35).

Now what was the secret of Christ’s effectiveness as a teacher? I believe it lies in two things: the man and the method.

The Man

Jesus Christ was not only the greatest teacher who ever lived, he, himself, was the greatest lesson he ever taught. There was about Jesus a strength of character and a beauty of life that supported everything he said. His actions were practical demonstrations of his teachings. He lived out in his

life what he advocated with his lips.

He not only *taught* The Golden Rule, but by his treatment of others he showed his followers how to practice it.

He not only gave the disciples a new morality, theology and ethic, he gave them a new life and, by his example, taught them how to live it.

So the first clue to his effectiveness as a teacher lies in the man himself.

The Method

The second secret of this teaching success is found in the method he used,

“And he taught them many things in parables,” (and) “he did not speak to them without a parable.”

As George Buttrick points out, whenever we hear the word “parable” certain well-loved pictures crowd in upon the mind.

“We see a rocky pass where a man fell among thieves, a shepherd searching through mountains and night for a single stray sheep, a bend in the road where a prodigal boy catches sight of home.”

The parables were a trademark of Jesus’ teaching for “he did not speak to them without a parable.”

There never has been a teller of stories who could equal Jesus. As Buttrick explains, Christ did not invent the parabolic method, any more than Beethoven invented sonatas. But in much the same way as Beethoven, that master of music poured new meaning into an art form that had existed for 200 years before his time, so too, Jesus took the technique of teaching through parables and, “under his transforming touch, turned its water into wine.”

What is a Parable?

Well, you ask, what is a parable? I suppose the simplest answer was given by a little girl who said with an insight beyond her years, “A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

Literally, the word means: “a throwing along side” or “something by the way.” But the little girl’s

definition can hardly be improved upon. A parable is, “an outward symbol of an inward reality.” A narrative of some scene in life, or process in nature, which Jesus used to illustrate some spiritual truth.

To put it another way, the *parables* were a revelation in words, even as the *miracles* were a revelation in works. Each of them, in their own way explained what Jesus had come to do and teach.

To us these matchless stories are black marks upon white paper. Printed paragraphs from pages of the Bible. But to the people of Jesus’ day the parables were actual words spilling from the lips of One whose every gesture and inflection added subtle shades of meaning to what he said. They were verbal lamps casting light upon life and death. God and man. Sin and salvation. And these incomparable stories are as alive in content, meaning and interest today as they were nearly two-thousand years ago.

The Parables as History

Dr. Buttrick points out,

“Here, with all the sharpness of an etching, is the pageantry of Palestine as these verbal lamps cast light upon a land of contrast. Green rolling hills. Parched, barren desert land. Barns bursting with fatness. Beggars barely able to survive. Dives, the rich man, languishing in luxury. Lazarus, the poor man, so forlorn as to have his sores licked by dogs. Jews clinging tenaciously to a sense of privilege and Gentiles reacting with hatred toward the contempt they have been shown.

“Here on a fertile plot is a sower trudging narrow furrows. Over on a favored slope is a vineyard laden with luscious fruit. Back on a distant hillside is a shepherd keeping watch over his flock, while out on a sun-baked plain is a strand of grain growing ‘white unto harvest.’ Here in the parables of Jesus are the sights and sounds and smells of the market place, the sick room, the wedding feast, the

funeral procession and the mountain pass where robbers lurk. Here is Palestine in all of its stark reality and haunting beauty, and under the spell of these unforgettable stories we are able to batter down the barriers of time and space and walk once more where Jesus walked.”

Why did Jesus choose this particular word form as his method of teaching? It seems to me there are three reasons why he spoke in parables and the first is that he wished to --

Stimulate Interest

It was Tennyson who said:

“Truth embodied in a tale shall enter in at lowly doors.”

It is one of the peculiarities of human nature that a story or word picture is always more effective in conveying truth than the most carefully thought-out and craftily presented argument. This seems to be true no matter what our chronological age, for when it comes to stories we are all children. If our minds have begun to wander under the weight of some philosophical argument we immediately respond when the speaker moves to a simple story that illustrates what he has been trying to say.

Let me show you what I mean. We are told that in a far distant land there lived a wise man who knew the answer to all things. Many people came to him seeking advice which he gave freely to all. In this same distant country, in a far distant corner, there lived a little boy. He had heard of the wise man, for his fame had spread throughout the entire land.

One day the little boy was thinking, as all little boys do at times. He was trying to think of a question the wise man couldn't answer. Finally he got an idea and he thought, I know what I'll do, I'll capture a bird and make my way to the cottage where the wise man lives. I'll knock on the door and then put the bird in my hand behind my back. After a while the wise man will come and he'll look down and say, “Good day, my son, what can I do for you?” And I'll say, “Tell me wise man, what do I have in my hand?” He'll say, “My son, you have a bird in your hand.” Then

I'll say, "Tell me, wise man, is that bird dead or is it alive?" If he says the bird is dead, I'll open my hand, let it fly away and show it to him alive. If he says the bird is alive, at that moment I'll squeeze out its life, hold it forth and show it to him dead.

Well, the little boy got his chance just as everyone of you will someday get your chance to stand before God and give your so-called perfect reason for rejecting Christ. He caught the bird. He made his way across to the countryside until he came to the cottage of the wise man. He knocked on the door and slipped the bird behind his back.

After a moment the wise man came and said, "Good day my son, what can I do for you?" "Please sir, what do I have in my hand?" "My son, you have a bird in your hand." "Tell me, wise man, is that bird dead or is it alive?" A moment passed. It seemed like an eternity to the small boy. And then, looking deep into his eyes, the wise man said, "My son. . .*that*. . .depends. . .on . . .*you*."

I submit to you that you can hear a thousand sermons on the responsibility of each individual for the salvation of his or her own soul and, in all probability, the reasoning and logic of those discourses will be missed. But long after philosophical arguments have been lost in the sea of your forgetfulness, that simple story of a boy and a bird and a wise man's wonderful answer, will linger on to haunt you.

It is one of the peculiarities of human nature that "a story is a joy forever." Recognizing this human quirk, Jesus capitalized upon it to arouse the interest and attention of his hearers.

Recognizing that pure, unrelieved pronouncements of naked truth (however great) usually results in a waning interest on the part of the hearers, "Jesus used parables to punch holes in the walls of the household of truth so common people could peek inside and 'see' what he was talking about. Thus, these verbal lamps were not *only* creations of pure artistry, but they were open casements which shed light upon life and destiny and God." Little wonder then that we are told,

"No man ever spoke like this man," and "the common people heard him gladly."

Smite the Conscience

A second reason why Jesus used the parabolic method as his main teaching technique was to smite the conscience of his antagonists.

As we saw last week, the storm center which swirled around Jesus when he began his public ministry soon hardened into open hostility as the Pharisees and Sadducees sought to block him at every turn. Therefore, lest they be stirred to immediate antagonism, and the crisis of the cross be precipitated before his time had come, Jesus turned to the technique of teaching in parables to keep the Pharisees and Sadducees from breaking into open rebellion, while, at the same time, this methodology allowed him to slip his message into their minds in a subtle but significant way.

This, I believe, is the true explanation of that otherwise difficult passage in Matthew 13 where Jesus describes his purpose in the use of parables.

“Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing, they see not, and hearing, they hear not and do not understand” (Mt. 13:13).

As he goes on to explain in verse 15,

“This people’s heart is waxed gross, their ears are dull of hearing and their eyes they have closed. . . “

He was saying they had deliberately prejudiced themselves against him and his teachings. Because of this hardness of heart the only way he could get through to them was by using a simple story which disarmed antagonism, while at the same time, it stimulated inquiry.

The purpose of a lamp is not to hide things, but that hidden things might be brought to light. The same must be said of these “verbal lamps.” It was their purpose to lure men into thinking, so, in the process, they might find their way through the labyrinthine corridors of their prejudice and hatred and hardness of heart, into the everlasting light of God’s love as reflected in the face of Jesus.

He was not hiding, but veiling

“the light that were else too bright,
for the feebleness of the sinner’s sight.”

By using parables it was his purpose, *not* to prevent people from seeing, but to quicken their perception so their sin-shuttered eyes might catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

Furthermore, by using a seemingly innocent story, Jesus was able to expose the misconduct of his antagonists before they were aware he was attacking them. As result, again and again in their confusion, they convicted themselves.

I don’t suppose there’s any more beautiful illustration of this principle of using a parable to convict and correct than in the case of Nathan and David (II Sam. 12:1-7). As you remember, David had stolen Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah and taken her to be his own. Instead of storming into the presence of the king and accusing him of adultery and murder, Nathan, the prophet, sauntered into the throne room one day and told David a parable. It was about a rich man who had many sheep and a poor man who had nothing but one ewe lamb which was something of a pet to him and his children.

One day the rich man had a house guest whom he needed to entertain, but instead of taking one of his own sheep and preparing it for a meal, he took the poor man’s lamb and served it instead. It was a touching story, and stirred David’s better nature. When he responded with indignation, insisting that the rich man not only repay the poor man fourfold, but be put to death, Nathan turned and said quietly, “*Thou art that man.*”

The effect was devastating. Utterly disarmed, the raw, running wound of his transgression exposed for all to see, David cried out in humiliation,

“I have sinned against the Lord.”

And because his was a truly broken and contrite heart, the Lord forgave him and he later became known as a man after God’s own heart.

In a similar way (although unfortunately with not the same happy results) Jesus used the technique

of a simple story to smite the conscience of his antagonists. Through such parables as “the wicked husbandman” he was able to hold a mirror up before them and, in confusion and shame, they convicted themselves.

So parables both concealed *and* revealed the truth. And because, “a story once lodged in the mind is *not* inert like a nugget of gold,” but is a vital and growing thing, like a planted seed, Jesus was able to, at one and the same time, smite the conscience and excite a response from his hearers without driving them into open rebellion.

Sharpen the Memory

The final reason Jesus resorted to the use of parables was because in so doing he was able to sharpen the memory and thus increase the retention of his hearers.

As archbishop Trench points out in his Notes On The Parables,

“Had our Lord spoken naked, spiritual truth, many of his words would have passed away from the hearts and memories of his hearers. But, given in the form of an interesting story, (his words) not only aroused interest and excited inquiries, but were more easily retained in the minds of those who heard them.

“His words laid up in the memory, were, to many that heard him, like the money of another country, of which they knew not the value, but which yet was ready for use when they reached that land.”

Long after the particular truth Jesus had been teaching became a blur, the story upon which he had hung that truth, remained vivid and clear. Gradually, as they rethought the story, its deeper meaning came back into focus so that days, weeks, even years later, the impact of a particular parable was as great, if not greater, than the first time it was heard.

For instance, I doubt if there is one of you who can remember the sermon entitled, “Worms or

Wings - - A Nature Study.” I have preached it twice from this pulpit by request. But I’m sure anyone who heard the sermon will remember the story of the foolish young skylark around which it was built.

While the sermon is lost, each time you think of the skylark who sold his wings for worms, you are reminded of the *point* of the sermon, which is the utter, tragic folly of allowing the stuff of time to rob us of the treasures of eternity.

In conclusion, let me hark back to this. We’ve had a lot to say about the method of Jesus’ teaching this morning, but we must not lose sight of the man. While Jesus was a teacher, a born teacher, indeed a prince of teachers, he was much more than a teacher. James Stewart is right on the mark when he says,

“It is not an exaggeration to say, and it cannot be too strongly put, that if we possessed the whole bulk of Jesus New Testament teaching and nothing more than that, the world would still be perishing as surely as if he had never come, for he himself is far more important than his teaching; and it is not the teaching of Christ that saves, but the Christ who teaches.”

Or, as someone else has said succinctly,

“Jesus came not so much to preach the gospel, as that there might be a gospel to preach.”

This morning I invite you to meet the “Christ of the Verbal Lamps.” The One who was not only the greatest teacher who ever lived, but who was, himself, the greatest lesson he ever taught.