

Who Is This Man? : The Teacher
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 25:1-9; Titus 2:1-8; Mark 6:1-6

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Mark 6:1-6. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy, inspired, inerrant Word. “Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.”

Do you remember your teachers? Several stick out in my mind. There’s Miss McNeely, my second grade teacher who inspired me to write dozens of short stories, whose encouragement of my creative writing I still use every week writing sermons. There’s Mr. Goss, the teacher who taught the class to play chess and encouraged learning how to think logically. Then in high school, my freshman and senior year English lit teacher, Mr. Lawson. Not only did he teach me the finer points of *Romeo and Juliet* and Mark Twain, he also ingrained in me that you have to earn the right to your opinion. Then there was Dr. Parker, my college professor for handbells, who taught us that despite all the hours of practice, we aren’t perfect performers but forgiven followers of Jesus. (It says a lot about my middle school experience that I can’t remember anyone from there!)

A great teacher is like a crown jewel – and I don’t just say that because I’m married to one. Teaching is a thankless job, full of long hours and low pay and people who think that you work seven hours a day and get three months off in the summer. But more than that, a great teacher can inspire you to do your best. Their words can affect the course of your life in more ways than one. When you think about it, for at least 13 years of our young lives, we spend about as much time with our teachers as we do our parents, maybe more. A bad teacher can harm us, but good teachers can help us become different, better people.

And so today we land on the role of Jesus as teacher. For this series, we’re looking at the different roles Jesus played, and this is one that almost everyone agrees upon. Jesus is famous for his teachings; even skeptics agree the basic teachings of Jesus were well worth preserving. We who are Christians accept all of them as the truth. But if we understand who Jesus was and is as a teacher, we’ll find He’s not what we expect – He’s far more.

Just as a refresher, we’re starting each week at the beginning of Scripture to look at how God intended things, how they were broken in the fall, and how the Father, Son, and Spirit have worked over time to renew and restore things to the way they were made to be. So let’s think about the origins of humanity and the need for teaching.

At the beginning, it doesn't seem like Adam and Eve really needed to be taught much of anything. God gave them one command, which they disobeyed. But in Genesis 1, God doesn't tell them how to exercise dominion over the land and the animals. God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed in the garden. In one sense, they were naïve; they knew very little about the world. But they knew all they needed to know – God created them, He loved them, and He came alongside them. Adam didn't have to learn the names of the animals, for example – God has Adam name them! God gives Adam the garden to cultivate it and take care of it. No instructions; he was made for this job.

What's ironic is that the need for instruction comes once Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They gain all this knowledge, but they don't have any wisdom. They don't have any way to process it. And because they disobeyed God in obtaining that knowledge, they lose their only avenue for learning what it all means. They wanted to be like God, but what they got was too much to handle. That the first thing Adam and Eve do is clothe themselves shows just how little they really understand the knowledge they've received.

And from Adam to Noah, humanity is mostly uninterested in learning God's ways. At the time of the great flood, virtually everyone's intention is evil all the time. We have the knowledge of good and evil, but humanity doesn't ever choose good. Without God's intervention, it's still true: we don't do good on our own. We need help; we need "training in righteousness," as Paul puts it in 1 Timothy.

After the flood, God calls out to Abram, and He teaches Abram one essential: trust me. Abram does. That trust is tested on several occasions, but Abram learns the lesson, to the point where he trusts God to restore his son Isaac. For Abraham's family, the lesson is the same: trust in YHWH, the one true God who has spoken to us.

Unfortunately, after years of captivity in Egypt, the Israelites forget that lesson. Even when God shows Himself through mighty deeds and displays of Himself like a pillar of fire and cloud, they don't trust. So God has a new lesson for them: the Law. God gives Israel the law for a few reasons. It enables them to live together in harmony with each other. When they come out of Egypt, they are twelve tribes with tons of people and lots of disagreements and arguments – the law allows them to live together in peace. It establishes clear lines of morality.

But the law does more than that. The law also teaches the Israelites how to be a holy people set apart for the LORD. Not everything in the Law is explicitly moral; when God talks about unclean animals, He tells the Israelites, "they will be unclean for you." The temple rules and rituals weren't moral; they kept Israel different from her neighbors. They told the Israelites how they could approach the holy and unapproachable God in a way acceptable to Him.

Most importantly, though, the Law displays our need for Him and our reliance on Him. There are positive commands in the Law, things God says you must do, like "keep the Sabbath" and "honor your mother and father." We must love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. Those things have no end. You can never "max out" on those things. You can never humanly do enough to completely fulfill the law. The law pushed believers like David to rely on God and not on himself or his ability to keep the law.

But despite the fact that Moses was a fine prophet and teacher, despite others coming in his stead, despite many faithful people training their sons and daughters in God's way, the overwhelming majority of Israel ignored what God had taught them. They ignored it so thoroughly that God allowed oppressors to come so they would cry out to Him. Eventually, God sent the nation into exile in order to get their attention. After the captivity in Babylon, the people knew they had failed and became interested in learning God's ways.

Yet by Jesus' day, Judaism was a religion, not a relationship with God. God's law had been replaced by a man-made law designed by the rabbis – the teaching class. They thought if you followed the rabbinic law, it was impossible to break God's law. Yet they misunderstood the point of God's law, its spirit.

It was no longer about loving God and trusting in Him for forgiveness and grace; it was about how well you could keep the traditions and interpretations of the rabbis. Rabbis debated what you could get away with – what oath you could break and why, what grounds made divorce OK, how to travel on the Sabbath and not break the law. The deep truths of God were ignored and lost. There were tons of teachers, tons of rabbis, but the world desperately needed a Good Teacher who could steer us through the law into life with God.

That's where Jesus came in. Jesus was and is a teacher extraordinaire. Even those who rejected Him, like those in His hometown, said, "Where does He get these things? What's this wisdom?" Everywhere He went, Jesus astonished the crowds. They were amazed that He taught with authority. Other rabbis didn't do that. They cited rabbis from the far past for their opinions. It was like doing term papers for college with a lot of footnotes. The rabbis taught a ton, but never with authority, never with certainty, only opinions based on other opinions.

Jesus taught clearly and straightforwardly. He never quoted other rabbis, just the Scripture. And when He taught, He didn't teach suggestions or ideas. He taught truth. Many of the parables He taught weren't difficult to understand but to accept. Yet He taught not as someone who had been passed down truth from generation to generation, but the One from whom truth comes.

Now Jesus taught so much about so many things – about the Kingdom of God, what it's like, lots of stories. It's impossible to cover everything that Jesus taught in twenty minutes. But three simple things shape virtually all of Jesus' teaching, and if you can remember them, you can tell any friend about the core of Jesus' message.

The first thing He taught was that *we are in worse shape than we think spiritually*. Jesus' core teaching was nothing less than a gut punch to the soul: your self-righteousness is destroying your soul. Being "good" leads to hell. Why? Because we don't need to be a little bit better than we are. The standard God sets is perfection. Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:48, "You are to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

The perfection Jesus taught means going beyond the letter of the law to its spirit: don't lust, don't hate, pray for your enemies, help them. Give to the one who persecutes you. Give in secret, pray in secret. Have no thought for money; a rich man (though in Jesus' culture to have the blessing of God) is less likely to get into heaven than a camel fitting through the eye of a needle. You must die to your earthly desires to follow the Kingdom every day.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most famous preaching, and people love the Beatitudes because Jesus talks about people who are blessed – and, of course, they assume they're in that list. But if we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously, it's terrifying. It lays bare our total inability to save ourselves and shows just how far off the mark we are.

In school, you could get an A with a 90, a B with an 80, you could even pass with a 60 if you had to. And there was the curve – if the highest score in the class was a 50, 50 became a 100 and everyone was graded accordingly. But there's no curve with God – there's perfect, and there's failing, and no one gets a passing grade for being a little better than everyone else. Jesus' teachings blow apart our concept of being "good enough" to make it to heaven. The Sermon on the Mount proves we are doomed if we are left to our own devices.

That has to sink in; we need to live with that for a while. We have to deal with the fact that our sin is far greater than we imagined; we are farther than God than we thought. We need to be cut to the heart about our sin and realize, "I can't save myself." Because once we do, we can understand the joy of Jesus' second key teaching. As Tim Keller, pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, puts it: *we are far more loved than we could ever dream.*

John 3:16 is well known because it's the summary of that love: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever might believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus says in Luke 15:7 that heaven rejoices more over one sinner who repents than 99 righteous persons who have no need of repenting (whoever those may be). When Zacchaeus, a notorious tax collector, repents and shows it through his actions, Jesus says, "Salvation has come to this house today! This man too is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

Jesus welcomes the least likely people into the Kingdom. Everyone who turns to Him and away from sin in their hearts and in their actions has a place. In Luke 7, a woman known in town as a sinner comes and anoints Jesus' feet. He forgives her her sins on the spot. He forgives Peter, who denied even knowing Him. In the parable of the prodigal, the father races out to his son filled with compassion for him. Over and over again, Jesus teaches that God's mercy is available to everyone who humbles themselves and comes to Jesus for forgiveness.

And because that forgiveness comes through Himself, as Jesus is both the forgiver and the One sacrificed for forgiveness, the third of Jesus' teachings is a surprise: *Jesus teaches primarily about Himself.* Jesus speaks regularly about who He is, what He does, and what He will do. He teaches about Himself all these different things:

He has the authority to forgive sin (Matthew 9:6). He is Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). He will be betrayed, crucified, dead, and buried for three days before His resurrection (Matthew 12:40 and countless other places). He is the Christ (Matthew 16:16). He came to serve (Matthew 20:28). He will one day return in glory (Matthew 25:31). He is from heaven (John 3:13). He gives eternal life (John 6:27). He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11). He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). He is the bread of life (John 6:48), the light of the world (John 8:12), and the true vine (John 15:1).

Jesus' teachings about Himself are all over the gospels. You can't separate them from the rest. His moral teachings and His teachings about Himself flow together. It's because a relationship with Him is the answer to all our moral failings. He is the subject of much of His teaching because the only way to be made perfect is to for Jesus' sacrifice to cover our sins. When Thomas Jefferson decided to create a book extracting what he considered Jesus' moral teachings from the rest of Scripture, he used scissors and glue. If you look at the original copy, you find Jefferson often had to cut mid-verse to get rid of references to miracles or Jesus' teachings about Himself. It was a mess.

That's where things get tricky. Because Jesus is only a great teacher if His words about Himself are true. The philosopher Socrates didn't bring teach about himself, and neither did Ghandi or Buddha or many others the world considers wise teachers. The option that Thomas Jefferson chose doesn't leave us with a great moral teacher but a bad one who couldn't even keep His followers from making Him into a god. And if the words of Scripture are what Jesus taught, if Jesus isn't the Son of God come in the flesh to rescue us, He's crazy and delusional.

That leaves us with a final option: that Jesus was who He said He was, and His teachings about Himself should lead us to worship and adore Him as Savior, Lord, and Son of God. And we should study His teachings diligently because as Jesus says in John 5:39, the Scriptures testify about Him. We know how to belong to Him through becoming His students, by sitting at His feet and learning from Him.

So our one and only big takeaway question today is this: will you accept Jesus as your teacher? We talk about Jesus being our Savior and Lord, the one we trust in and the one who we rely on for salvation. But most of us don't learn much more about Jesus than what we get from church service on Sunday mornings. His teachings are meant to steer our every moment. Because when we are saved from sin, when we turn from our past, we can actually start living more and more like the people Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount. We aren't saved so we can do whatever we want. We are saved for a purpose – to glorify God in everything we do. How can we glorify Him if we don't know His desires for our lives?

I want to encourage you to read your Bible regularly. Study it. Dig deeply into it. Ask questions about it. Send them to me and I'll help you find your answers. Because Jesus is not primarily a teacher of the good life or the moral life; He's the teacher for His people how we should act as citizens of His eternal Kingdom. With His grace in our lives and His teaching on our hearts, we can grow in confidence that we are His people and that we are indeed following His ways.