The Methods of the Master Teacher

BY JOHN C. VAUGHN

No better teaching methods could exist than those of the Master Teacher Himself. G. Campbell Morgan (n.d.) in his classic work, The Great Physician, gives insight into the methods of the Master Teacher Jesus Christ as he dealt with numerous people in a variety of ways in one-on-one discipleship. Of course, Christ always used the perfectly appropriate method for each individual, and we could turn to a number of passages to learn about the Master Teacher’s methods. But, no clearer example of His teaching methods is found than in Mark 8:1-26. “The Feeding of the Four Thousand” is possibly the most revealing passage in the gospels from which to study our methods.

This miraculous feeding took place in the third year of the Lord’s public ministry. Remember that the first year is called “The Year of Obscurity.” Very few knew Him; most who heard Him were not prepared to respond to His message. Many months of the first year of His ministry were spent simply continuing the call for repentance begun by John the Baptist. The second year is labeled “The Year of Opportunity,” in which Christ worked many miracles and reached multitudes with the Gospel. But, the third year is named “The Year of Opposition,” during which the Pharisees intensified their efforts to silence Jesus. It was during this year that Jesus spoke more in parables and constantly instructed those He healed to keep quiet.

In the few months left before Christ’s ministry of reconciliation would be passed on to His disciples, the Master Teacher had to thoroughly communicate to His followers His principles and practical applications before He commissioned them to take over His ministry and proclaim to the entire world what He had taught and done. The minimum essential required for their “graduation” was that they should know the essence of the Gospel: “Trust Christ.” Their proclamation would be powerless unless they themselves were trusting Him for everything, especially the practical affairs of life such as their own physical needs. Also, it was essential that they be able to realize the importance of patience in teaching others just as Christ had been patient with them. It would be necessary to illustrate both the principle of trust and the practice of patience required of effective teachers. As Paul would teach Timothy when preparing him for graduation, the followers of Christ must be able to “exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

In one story we see how effectively Christ taught His disciples, tested them, and reinforced His message through illustration to them. There are three distinct elements in the single story of the “Feeding of the Four Thousand” that are often treated as several disconnected texts.

The Principle of Repetition

It had been about two weeks since Christ had fed the five thousand. In that event, recorded in Mark 6:35-44, there were possibly thirty thousand people present since the five thousand represents only the number of men present. There, as the Lord was preparing His disciples to hear Him announce His departure, He presented a momentous lesson on His ability to meet the needs of those who trust Him. He answered the disciples’ concern for the hungry multitudes by showing them what He could do with five loaves and two fishes. Not only did each disciple labor to distribute the multiplied food, but each of them also collected a small basket of leftovers in their own hands as a personal illustration of the sufficiency of Christ’s provision.

Just a couple of weeks later, in Mark 8, the Lord announced in essence, “Take out a half-sheet of paper. Quiz time!” This time it was He who voiced the concern for the people. In the first three verses of the chapter, He asked the disciples if any of them had ideas on feeding the multitude.

“Jesus called his disciples unto him, and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far” (Mark 8:1-3).

Yet, none of the disciples knew what to do. Would an effective teacher not expect someone in the class to suggest, “Why don’t we see what is available? You bless it, we will pass it out, and You can show these people what You showed the others.” No, the “disciples answered him, From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?” (Mark 8:4). He patiently repeated the lesson. This time he started with seven loaves and a few small fishes. However, He followed the same lesson plan as before showing that trust includes obedience and faith with thanksgiving.

This time, the disciples collected seven huge baskets of leftovers, baskets like the one used to lower Paul from the wall in Damascus. At the “Feeding of the Five Thousand,” the individual disciples were confronted with Christ’s sufficient provisions—a small basket for each—but now they had to work together to collect the fragments, dragging huge and heavy baskets that reinforced the lesson. This second miracle, so much like the first, was an excellent visible lesson—a sign to the disciples that hungry souls who trust Christ will be fed, both by bread from the oven and by bread from heaven.

The Principle of Responsibility

Immediately after this miraculous sign was given to the disciples in Mark 8:1-9, “the Pharisees came forth, and began
to question with him, seeking of him a sign from heaven, tempting him” (Mark 8:11). Would He repeat the lesson? Would He give them an illustration of the truth they had already refused to believe? Mark tells us “he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation. And he left them and entering into the ship again departed to the other side” (Mark 8:12-13).

He kept control of the classroom. He did not seek to entertain, but demanded a teachable spirit from those He could teach. There were two nearly identical lessons for the disciples, but no lesson for the Pharisees. Why? The answer is a key to the method of the Master Teacher: Concentrate on those who want to learn, and control those who want to disrupt.

The Principle of Reinforcement

Here is both the summary of the lesson and the stunning illustration that Christ used to drive the point home to His students. Here also is a necessary application to Christian education. Christian education alone is capable of confronting not mere human ignorance, but actual spiritual blindness. The Church is the ekklesia, Greek for “called out assembly.” Educate is from the Latin for “to lead out.” Thus, Christian Education is essentially, leading out the called out. The review and illustration are in Mark 8:14-26.

In Mark 8:14-21 there is a conversation between Christ and the disciples while on the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. He began to explain why He refused to give in to the Pharisees’ demands. He warned the disciples, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod. In other words, they must avoid the corrupting influence of the lust for religious or political power. He sought not only to impart information to the disciples, but to guide their character development. Sadly, they were preoccupied with the “bread lesson.” Having forgotten to take any bread with them, they were still unprepared for class when this lesson came. At the very mention of leaven (here an illustration of corruption) they began their “last minute cram” for what they feared was the next bread quiz. “They reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have no bread” (Mark 8:16).

Now the Lord intensifies the lesson to correct the disciples for their slowness in learning: “Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? Perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened?” (Mark 8:17). He was trying to teach them to trust Him. He was also trying to teach them whom they should bring to trust Him. He was teaching them to be different from the unreachable, to learn from the lessons of the two similar miracles. He wanted them to learn that He indeed could be trusted and that He was even willing to repeat and review so that they, as teachable students, could truly learn. What teacher has not said the equivalent of these words:

“Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?” (Mark 8:18-21).

In essence He said, “When are you going to start trusting Me to meet your physical needs so that you can concentrate on learning to meet the spiritual needs of others? Trust Me to provide physical bread so that you can trust Me to help you distribute the spiritual bread. Do not be blind to the blindness of men. I am not trying to teach you physical things, but spiritual things.”

The best teachers learn from the Master Teacher. They know they have only one lesson regardless of their subject matter or their approach: “Trust and obey, for there is no other way!” Math, science, English—whatever the medium, the message is communicated primarily through the life of the teacher, not just through the lesson itself. The lesson of Mark 8 was driven home in a powerful illustration as Christ healed a blind man in an unusual way to show the disciples dramatically what He wanted them to know. No other blind man was healed in this way. Christ “spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, [then] asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up and said, I see men as trees, walking” (Mark 8:23-24). Is that not the way most men have seen the teaching method of Christ? They have a vague grasp of it, they are not completely in the dark about it, but it is not clear. So what did the Master Teacher do? He did the same thing for the blind man that He did for the disciples. He touched him again. “He put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly” (Mark 8:25).

Can you imagine the scene? Christ turns to look at the disciples, their faces illuminated with understanding as the lesson finally sinks in: “If we would teach men to trust and obey, we must trust and obey. We must be willing to tell them again and again, to illustrate, to examine and to reinforce the lesson until they have it as their own.” That is the method of the Master Teacher. Teach them, test them, tell them again, test them again, challenge them, and illustrate the lesson. And, all the while, be driven by the realization that you will soon be gone while they remain to teach others as you have taught them.

“No man has a right to hear the Gospel twice until every man has heard it once,” the clever saying goes. Clever, but not true. Christ did not teach the rebellious and unreachable at all; He merely rebuked them. But He taught the teachable until they learned. He touched the trusting blind until they saw. He was the Master Teacher. His methods should be ours.

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