



A SAVIOR APPEARS: HE TAUGHT WITH AUTHORITY

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There are a lot of Bible verses that describe the experience of golfers, including most of the cries of lament. Consider, “they are always learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth”—surely this applies to golf.

It turns out that life is even trickier than golf. Our attention lurches from one popular idea to the next, from the next new thing to the one after that—always learning, never taught. Who can direct us to what is important in life?

Jesus’ words have given substance to western civilization, shaping the values even of those who reject the gospel, and revolutionizing the lives of those who place their faith in him. Our task in this message is to consider the profound and enduring teaching of Jesus.

In prior studies we looked at the birth of Christ and the beginning of his public ministry. In this message we will give particular attention not to his actions but to the spoken utterances, the teaching, of the Lord. Again, as has often been the case in this series, we can only look at a small part of the rich material that is available to us.

There are two statements of Jesus that will guide us. The first, “He taught them many things in parables.” The second is a pattern by which he corrected falsehoods, “You have heard it was said . . . but I say to you.”

Parables are simple stories with profound implications. They draw on the ordinary experience of hearers—farming, going to market, being a parent, etc. Shortly, we will consider one of Jesus best-known parables, the Good Samaritan.

The second category of instruction regards Jesus’ challenge of conventional wisdom concerning human happiness and the purposes of God. Whether directly or implicitly Jesus brings to light what his hearers assume is sound advice, exposes it, and then offers truth as an alternative. This pattern is particularly evident in the Sermon on the Mount. We will also consider some of Jesus’ teaching-with-authority in this well known sermon.

Returning to parables, let’s consider Jesus’ reason for teaching in this manner:

Mark 4:1-12:

¹The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. ²He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. . . .

. . . ⁹Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹²so that,

“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

Parables point to unseen realities. The actions described in a parabolic story—a sower with seed, for instance—are really about something more significant. The parable requires attentiveness and even a request for help in order to be eye opening. In all of life, most of the things worth knowing are not available on the surface. The disciples who sought out Jesus for understanding are the ones who benefitted from what they had heard.

Also, parables hide noble truths from those who will ignore or demean them. Not everyone has ears to hear. Jesus quotes a passage from Isaiah that is a part of a denunciation of idolatry. Stone statues cannot hear anything and those who worship idols become like their objects of worship—incapable of hearing. Parables keep valuable truth (‘ever hearing but never understanding’) from those who have chosen to turn from God in favor of man-made deities.

Finally, because a parable is a story it spreads its influence over time. A problem in math or a question of law leads to an answer, a conclusion, with nothing more expected. A story lingers and inspires, is remembered and speaks with new insight as one’s life context changes. Over time a story

persuades us of things we hadn't seen before.

I struggled with asthma when I was young. One summer when I was nine or ten was particularly difficult. I spent most days indoors and a lot of time reading. One book was captivating to me then and is memorable still. *Kontiki* is the account of a sea voyage by six men who sailed on a raft from South America to Polynesia. Thor Heyerdahl was testing a theory of population expansion and was determined to use only ancient technology (balsa logs, braided ropes, etc.) to fashion a craft, named 'Kontiki', which successfully made the 4000 mile journey.

Dangers and uncertainties—sharks, storms—abounded. Well regarded critics were numerous. But this band of six friends pressed forward and succeeded.

Some lessons that sank in over time as this story lingered in mind: 1) So-called experts don't know everything. Sometimes what is good is ridiculed. 2) The sailors needed and trusted each other. Shared adventure led to deep friendships.

I didn't know anything about the Bible or the purposes of God until some years later. But the lessons and perspective that Heyerdahl's book suggested helped me grasp the gospel story and helped prepare me to believe it.

Before he was a Christian, C.S. Lewis was an atheist who loved ancient mythologies. He came to faith when he realized that all the wonder-full things that drew him to old tales of human longing were found in Christ—with the added wonder that they were not only beautiful but true. Jesus' parabolic stories accomplish something similar—shaping our imaginations as a path to belief and discipleship.

With these things in mind, let's give attention to one of Jesus' best known parables—the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10:25-37:

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus' broad challenge to love both God and one's neighbor from the heart was too much for the law expert. 'Who is my neighbor?' is a question intent on limiting the number of people he must care for.

³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

Observations: 1) The man has been stripped of his clothing; he's been beaten unconscious, and he is therefore unrecognizable. We don't know by his appearance if this is a rich or a poor man, Jew or a Gentile. It is difficult to do 'one's duty' without knowing which rules apply. 2) Approaching travelers have no way of knowing whether danger still persists. The scene as presented is filled with unknowns.

³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

A genuinely unexpected tale. Samaritans were despised by 'righteous Jews,' and were routinely avoided as sources of moral contamination. It is remarkable for Jesus to cast a Samaritan as the good example in this story, and the extent of the Samaritan's tender care is amazing. Also, the priest and the Levite are not ordinary citizens—esteemed leaders among God's people, so we find their failure to act to be

especially troubling. Religious responsibilities in Jericho, presumably, keep them from seeing what matters to God.

The law expert's attempt to limit love led to a story filled with tensions: suffering and risk, religious duty vs. the need for mercy, a Samaritan as God's servant. Who was the neighbor? In verse 37 we read, 'The one who had mercy' (it was too difficult for the law expert to say out loud, 'the Samaritan'). And Jesus calls on all who hear this story to go and do likewise.

We should note that the issues at the heart of this parable are prominent among the reasons unbelievers give for rejecting the gospel today. Christians are scored for hypocrisy—for despising modern day 'Samaritans' and for an unwillingness to take risks for mercy's sake. We do well to examine ourselves in this light—are we more like the Good Samaritan or more like the priest and Levite? Is there a heart of mercy being formed in us?

Let me just offer you another perspective before we move onto some verses from the Sermon on the Mount. My interpretation of this story is the most common. The first thought most people have is that they are in the role of either the Samaritan or the priest or scribe and they are the one who comes by the beaten man late and will either choose to be a neighbor or not be a neighbor. That is the hard question we should ask ourselves. That's the nature of this interpretation but there is a very old and subtle telling of this story that changes the players and I think Jesus probably intended that this story could be asked and read on another level.

And the other level is this: We are the victim, not the priest or the passersby. We are the one dying on the side of the road. The role we play in this story is to be on the verge of losing everything. Everything has been taken from us; our very lives nearly forfeit. The Samaritan is Christ the one who comes and saves the dying man. He is an outsider who is despised by everybody else. No one wants anything to do with him. He comes for people who cannot save themselves and the religious establishment is completely different than Christ in his heart. And this is a story of the Savior who has come for those who are broken and needy.

Here is a simple story and I start to ask myself questions about how I view myself and how I view the mercy of the Lord. How do I view the condition of my need and how much he has given? How different is he in doing so? What else does this story face us with, and how else does it change our insights?

He taught them many things in parables. May we have

ears to hear.

We move now to Jesus' pattern of challenging conventional wisdom. The Sermon on the Mount is a counter to false religion. It challenges phoniness not open idolatry, hypocrisy not stiff-necked disobedience. It un.masks worldly assumptions that are couched as wisdom.

Matthew 5:1-3:

¹Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them.

He said:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus' challenge to familiar thinking begins at the beginning. Blessedness—real fulfillment, lasting well-being—comes not from accumulation but from emptiness. The opinion of others, measured accomplishments, a well polished self-image and the storing up of material goods gain us nothing of significance. Blessedness is built on admitting at the deepest level that we are inadequate and that we cannot do anything to change ourselves.

And Jesus goes on, continuing to find eternal value in that which the world fears and avoids: mourning, meekness, peacemaking, persecution. Our instructors have lied to us. What we have been taught must be rejected in favor of a deeper wisdom. Let's consider more closely the example of investments.

Matthew 6:19-21:

¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our actions in the present inevitably affects our future. But are we thinking far enough ahead? Are we trying to provide for a near term, earthly future (which is inherently unstable) or do we recognize that we are made for eternity?

Theft, moths, rust, stock market collapses, natural disasters, crazy people with dangerous weapons, and many other variables make this world's goods an inadequate source of security. And we have a better alternative. We can store up treasures in heaven. But what does this mean?

First, we can value relationships, treating others as more important than ourselves. We can join together with brothers and sisters in kingdom adventures and acts of service. These choices lead to deep friendships that will be enjoyed forever.

Second, our character, shaped by decisions now, will last forever. When we yield to the Spirit and choose to be merciful, or generous or courageous and then do so a second and third time we find ourselves changed at the core. We become someone new—I was blind but now I see and we take our core personhood with us into eternity.

Consider Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*. His responses to love and suffering create a beautiful heart. His opposite, Javert, is also shaped by his choices—becoming a person of impenetrable hardness. We can store treasures in heaven as we are serious about discipleship, letting Jesus make us more like him.

Lastly, perhaps most obviously, worship is eternal. Praise offered to God reverberates forever. Adoration never fades. When we drink in Scripture, we receive everlasting wisdom. Choosing worship is glorious in the moment and is an act of storing treasure in heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount ends this way

Matthew 7:24-29:

²⁴“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

²⁵The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶But everyone who hears these words

of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

²⁷The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

²⁸When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching,

²⁹because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Storms are inevitable. Life is going to test everyone, those who build on rock and on sand. But life's tests have

different outcomes for different people depending on their foundation. There are two requirements: hearing and acting—a strong foundation requires both.

We have given attention to Jesus as a teacher—as a teller of parables and as one who unmask the foolishness of the world. However, information alone is not enough. Have we accepted the challenge to ‘put in practice’ Jesus’ call to live by faith, trusting the power of God, and ready for storms and floods?