One of the strongest portraits of Jesus in the Gospels is that of a teacher.\(^2\) Other than the title “Lord,” people call Jesus “Teacher” more often than any other epithet in the New Testament, and often with a great deal of respect and admiration (Mk 10:17; Mt 22:16).\(^3\) Jesus also calls himself a teacher. In the story of the preparation for the Last Supper, for example, Jesus instructs his disciples to find a room for the paschal meal, and to tell the owner that “the teacher” has need of it (Mk 14:14; Mt 26:18; Lk 22:11). Apart from his portrayal as an infant, the episode of the 12 year-old Jesus amazing the teachers in the temple with his learning is the earliest picture we have of him (Lk 2:46-47). Other depictions include the itinerant Jesus teaching multitudes (Matthew 5-7); individuals (John 3 and 4); adversaries (Luke 15), and disciples (Mk 4:10-20, 33-34; 7:17-23; 10:10-11, 23-31). He teaches in the temple (Mt 26:55; Mk 14:19; Jn 7:14); in synagogues (Mt 4:23; Mk 6:2; Lk 4:15; Jn 6:59); in houses (Mk 7:17-18; 9:28); from a boat (Lk 5:3); on the hillside (Mt 5:1-2); at a well (Jn 4:7-30); at table (Lk 7:36-50); on the road (Lk 24:13-32); and by the shore Mk 2:13; 4:1). \(^{In other words, Jesus teaches people wherever he is and wherever they are.}\) In fact, Mt 26:55 evidences that Jesus taught on a daily basis. Today, this traveling teacher is considered the most famous pedagogue in the Western world.\(^4\) With these thoughts in mind, I want to (1) examine the words used to specify “teacher” in the ancient world and show how Jesus both corresponds to and differs from the perceptions this title implies; (2) suggest some teaching methods of Jesus; and (3) propose a way modern teachers can learn from him.

**Didaskalos, rabbi, epistatēs**

The evangelists use several words that characterize Jesus as a teacher: *didaskalos, didaskale, rabbi, rabboni, epistata*, and

---

1 This essay honors my Doctor Father, Edgar Krentz, on the occasion of his retirement from seminary committee work, for I cannot imagine that this master-pedagogue will ever stop teaching!


3 Jesus is addressed as “Lord” no fewer than 83 times, and as “rabbi” or “teacher” 56 times. The next most frequently used title for Jesus is the enigmatic “Son of man” found no fewer than 37 times.

epistatës. Of these, the most common term is didaskalos. Of the forty-eight instances of didaskalos in the Gospels, friends (Mk 4:38; 13:1), enemies (Mk 12:19; Mt 8:19; Lk 20:21), and strangers (Lk 17:13; Mt 19:16; Mk 5:35) alike ascribe the title "didaskalos" to Jesus forty-one times. The Semitic equivalents, rabbi/master (Mk 9:5; 11:21; Jn 1:38, 49; 4:31) and the more intimate rabboni/my master are also used (Mk 10:51; Jn 20:16). Luke, the Evangelist who wrote for Gentiles, prefers his own words: epistatës/master (8:24; 9:49) and the direct address, epístata (5:5; 8:45, 17:13). Its etymology (one who "stands over" as an authority) suggests that epistatës is a synonym of rabbi, a fact confirmed by Luke's uses of this word in place of "rabbi" (9:33), a term that would have been meaningless to his readers. John, the latest of the evangelists, makes the rabbi/teacher association explicit (1:38; 20:16).

Early writings speak of four types of teachers who during Jesus' lifetime had adult followers: philosophers, sages, interpreters of the Jewish Law, and prophets. Elements of each category are present in Jesus' teaching. In fact, a recent trend in the renewed quest for the "historical Jesus" has been to find parallels to the sayings of Jesus within the corpus of material that reflects a Cynic philosophy. For the most part, however, the picture of Jesus in the Gospels best conforms to the picture of a rabbi. We see this first in the way people who were not his disciples come up to him and comfortably address him as "Rabbi" (Jn 3:2). Crowds, as well, treat Jesus with the respect accorded to teachers. Second, his words so grip people that they set themselves in the position of disciples. Third, the vocabulary used to describe his disciples (mathetai/learners and akolouthein/to walk behind; to follow after) corresponds to the technical terminology used for discipleship in first century rabbinic circles. Moreover, Jesus' relationship to his disciples is parallel to the behavior of rabbinic pupils to their masters, which fragments from early Jewish writings show:

Learning by itself did not make a pupil, and he did not grasp the full significance of his teacher's learning in all its nuances except through prolonged intimacy with his teacher, through close association with his rich and profound mind. The disciples accompanied their sage as he went to teach, when he sat in law court, when he was engaged in the performance of meritorious deeds such as helping the poor, redeeming slaves, collecting dowries for poor brides, bury-

---

6 Davies, 422 points out that while in Jesus' day the title "Rabbi" did not have the teacher-meanings it later acquired, it was more than a courtesy title and did in fact designate a teacher in the strict sense.
7 *TDNT* 2, "epistatës," 622-3.
10 See Perkins, 2-22 for an extended presentation of each type of "teacher" in Jesus' world. Also, Jones, 11-62.
12 *TDNT* 2, "didaskalos," 153.
13 Vernon Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) asserts that by the end of the first century C.E., the terminology and pattern of a teacher and his disciples are well established in the writings of Flavius Josephus, tannaitic rabbinic traditions, and the gospels. See also *TDNT* 2, "didaskalos," 154 and Davies, 422.
ing the dead, etc. The pupil took his turn preparing the common meal and catering to the general needs of the group. He performed personal services for his teacher, observed his conduct and was his respectful, loving companion (T Negaim 8:2; T.B. Pasahim 36a). Some laws could not be studied theoretically or merely discussed, but could only be learned by serving the teacher. The groups which consisted of a sage and his disciples had property in common, or a common fund from which food was brought (T.B. Erubin 73a). Study was not confined to the school or the synagogue, but was also carried on in the vineyard, in the shade of the dovecote, in fields, on paths under fig-trees and olives and in the market. It was not uncommon for the sage to conduct discourses and discussions with his pupils in the town square or in the market place, with the townspeople gathering around them and listening, irrespective of whether they were able to understand all or only part of the discussion (T. Berakoth 4:16; P.T. Berakoth II. 5c).14

Jesus also teaches like a rabbi. He sits as he teaches (Mk 4:1; 9:35; 12:41; 13:3; Jn 8:2) and he often cites the scriptures to prove his point (Mk 12:18-23). Furthermore, like rabbis, he is clever in his use of questions (Mt 22:20; Lk 10:25-26).15 In fact, the Synoptic writers note 187 times where Jesus answers a question with a question. When they tested him with the issue of obedience to Caesar, for example, Jesus requested a coin and then asked, “Whose head is this, whose title?” (Mt 22:20). Most often, Jesus’ penetrating questions either confront people or they send questioners off to live their way into the answer! Stories and parables (Lk 15:3-32), a traditional Jewish way of teaching, are also part of Jesus’ teaching arsenal. Jesus also decides like the rabbis did in matters of sin (Jn 9:1-2), marriage, divorce, etc. Finally, Jesus teaches through the favorite method of the rabbis, argumentation.16

Yet despite the similarities between Jesus and first-century rabbis, there are also significant differences between them. In fact, the evangelists make a point of saying that Jesus’ teaching style differed from that of the other Jewish teachers (Mt 7:28-29; see also Lk 4:32 and Mk 1:27). The following are some of these differences.

1. Jesus is not credentialed. Usually Jewish teachers were students of famous rabbis from whom they had learned faithfully what in turn they transmitted to their own pupils. As far as we know, however, Jesus did not study under any other teacher than those who would have taught him in Nazareth. First, his father Joseph would have instructed him at home.17 Then he would have attended a primary school (bet sefer/house of reading) associated with the village synagogue, as any Jewish male would have done in his time. Here he would have studied the Hebrew Bible and other forms of reading and writing common in elementary education.18 Quite probably he also attended a secondary school (bet talmud/house of learning) where he would have been concerned with the Oral law, the Halakah.19 In fact, his style of interaction

14 Stephen D. Jones, Rabbi Jesus: Learning from the Master Teacher (Macon, GA: Peake Road, 1997), 19.
15 See Jones, 19-21, for a fuller treatment of the similarities between Jesus and the rabbis.
16 Jones, 20, proposes that we rethink our characterization of the scribes and Pharisees, since their style is less antagonistic than we thought and more a reflection of the rabbinical style of probing for the truth.
18 Perkins, 23.
19 Toward the end of the second century the oral law is codified and it becomes known as the Mishnah.
with the Pharisees is not intelligible without presuming education. It is highly unlikely, however, that Jesus attended a yeshiva or bet midrash where he would have done advanced study, since at this point most students took up their profession. It is this scenario as backdrop that explains the objection some people had to Jesus' activities as a teacher. "How is it," they questioned, "that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (Jn 7:15, cf. Mt 13:54 and par.). Jesus' "credentials" therefore are not derivative. They are autonomous.

22 He is a charismatic instructor!

2. Jesus teaches with an unprecedented authority. Rabbis inserted themselves into the tradition. They fortified their statements by calling on the authority of the past. In contrast, Jesus never cites the authority of other rabbis to bolster what he says. Rather, he begins his instructions with an emphatic "I say to you" statement, which is often prefaced by the Hebrew word āmēn/certainly." Moreover, there are also instances when Jesus goes a step further saying, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, etc.). So while others uttered āmēn as a response to a blessing or a curse, or to signify their assent to the thoughts of another person (1 Cor 14:16; Rev 5:14; 7:12, etc.), Jesus uses āmēn to confirm his own statements. It is a usage without parallel in the whole of Jewish literature and the rest of the New Testament. Likewise, Jesus teaches in the imperative mood and not in the participial form that was customary among rabbis. Finally, Jesus is more than an interpreter of the law. Whereas rabbis exhausted biblical texts so that their students could interpret them, Jesus saw himself not only as an interpreter of a text but as the very embodiment of it. At the end of his synagogue sermon at Nazareth, for example, Jesus concludes by saying, "Today this scripture [i.e., Isa 61:1-2] has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:18-21). Other rabbis considered him blasphemous!

3. Jesus attracts disciples in a different way. Jewish students typically sought out their teachers, as John 1:35-39 describes.

The next day John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked toward him, and he said, "Behold, the lamb of God!"

---


22 Davies, 420.

23 1 Cor 15 gives an excellent example of this principle. Paul says, "I hand on to you what I have received...."

24 Scholars believe this way of articulating statements must definitely be Jesus' since the evangelists would never make up what was such an obvious deviation.


26 Davies, 420.
they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

Akiba, for example, journeyed from Babylon to Jerusalem to become part of Hillel’s training. Robbins describes this traditional process:

In rabbinic literature, rabbis are not depicted traveling around as Jesus does to find people who will respond to his summons to become disciple-companions. Instead, the tradition emphasizes the initiative by individual people to receive permission from a rabbi to become one of his student-disciples. The stories that characterize the beginning of a teacher/disciple relationship, therefore, receive their plot from the struggle of a young man to gain acceptance by a rabbi rather than the action and summons of a rabbi to attain a response from a person whom he wants as a disciple-companion.

Moreover, rabbis carefully interviewed and screened prospective disciples because their stature was in large part determined by the impressiveness of their disciples.

Discipleship on Jesus’ terms, however, is a different matter. First, the Gospels attest to the fact that Jesus’ disciples do not choose him. Rather, he “seeks them out” and “calls” them in the midst of their everyday activities (Mk 1:17, 2:14; Mt 4:19; 9:9; cf. Lk 5:10-11, 27-28; Jn 1:35-51). In addition, Jesus selects individuals who may not be the most worthy or likely of prospects. Levi the tax-collector (Mk 2:13-17) is an example. Regarded as a sinner by many, the pious shunned him (Lk 15:1-2). Finally, Jesus’ “calls” prompt an immediate, decisive response that testifies to the deep impression he made on people. Followers leave their homes, their relatives, and all their security. Mark 1:16-20 records such an occasion:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately, they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

Such severance from family is not common among rabbinic students, since preoccupation with the Law did not involve a break from the past.

And although the sacrifices made by the students of the rabbis for the sake of the Torah shine brightly, and although in times of persecution loyalty to their studies often meant death, nevertheless there was a marked difference between a life dedicated to study at the feet of a rabbi, in which the aim was an increasing knowledge of the Law which would eventually ‘qualify’ a student himself to become a rabbi, and the life of the Christian disciple (often, to judge from ‘the Twelve,’ not markedly studious by nature!) called to personal loyalty to Jesus in his way. For the one the Torah is the ultimate concern, for the other Jesus himself, and it is this personalism also that made of the talmid of Jesus not

27 Robbins, Jesus the Teacher, 101.
28 Jones, 34-35.
29 The synoptic tradition contains instances when the would-be disciples take the initiative, but these attempts fail, and there is no evidence that discipleship would have resulted.
30 Davies, 421.
another rabbi but an apostle or witness.31

4. Jesus' audience is not limited. Many teachers had a limited audience. They spoke to educated persons, most often men, who were seeking some higher insight into interpreting the Law or "wisdom" about divine things or the teaching of a particular philosophical school.32 Moreover, these people became a closed community. Jesus' teaching, on the other hand, is addressed to the general populace (Mk 3:7-8), in the open air and in the market places. In fact, the influence he had over the crowds alarmed the authorities. Disciples, as well as named and unnamed people among the throngs, are summoned to enter a special relationship with Jesus and his teaching.33 Remarkably, most of these persons included "outsiders": sinners, the outcasts, and even women and children. Mark records, for example, that Jesus chided his disciples for turning away children (10:13-16). Moreover:

By rejecting attempts to keep the children away, Jesus affirms the place of women among his followers. [For] if the children were pushed aside, then the women looking after them would have to return to their homes. By accepting the children, Jesus enabled their mothers to hear his word and become believers.34

Furthermore, the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Samaritan woman show that a person did not even have to be Jewish to understand Jesus' message about the reign of God and to share in its benefits.35 Luke also indicates that women accompanied Jesus from Galilee all the way to Jerusalem (8:1-3), but his story of Mary and Martha (10:38-42) best emphasizes their place in Jesus' following.

The picture of Mary at Jesus' feet makes it clear that she is receiving instructions just as male disciples would have done. Martha's preoccupation with preparing Jesus' meal has kept her from her role of student (v. 40). When Jesus asserts that Mary "has chosen the good part" (Lk 10:42), he breaks with society's expectation that women should behave as Martha does and busy themselves honoring Jesus with a special meal. Jesus insists that he does not require "hospitality" (cf. rejection of preoccupation with physical needs, Lk 8:18; 21:34). Martha should drop her preparations and join her sister (Lk 10:42-43, "one thing is necessary").36

5. The goal of learning in Jesus' discipling community is not informational but transformational. While in rabbinic circles learning takes place by listening to what the rabbi says, and appropriating knowledge and method from him, Jesus' "learners" are not called to learn a body of doctrine or the skills of interpretation from a master. Instead they are called to be with Jesus, and to listen to his words and to follow his example so that they might partner with him in his work for the kingdom. Consequently, they are summoned to be transformed: to die to themselves; to be born from above; and to become like little children. Such lessons are not learned in fixed locations, but on the road and in the doing!

6. The relationship between Jesus and his disciples is permanent, lifelong. Contrary to other Jewish students who became rabbis themselves after their rabbinic apprenticeship, Jesus' disciples are called to a lifelong relationship with him, and not merely to his teaching. Furthermore, they would never become rabbis in their own

31 Davies, 422.
32 Perkins, 30.
33 Robbins, 114.
34 Perkins, 35.
35 Perkins, 37.
36 Perkins, 34.
right, but would always remain disciples. Ultimately, however, these mathetai are sent out (apostolein) all over Palestine to do and to be what they had heard and seen in Jesus. It is a commitment unto death!

In sum, it may be said that Jesus was a charismatic teacher who through unorthodox ways enabled people to stretch beyond the confines of their society, and that his call was to an ongoing experience that is transformative.

**Jesus’ methodology**

Long before audiovisual aids, transparencies, computer technology, and other forms of modern teaching, Jesus attracted, commanded, and influenced multitudes, small groups, and individuals merely by his words and example. Several facets of his personality come to mind in reflecting how he did this: (1) Jesus met people where they were, or, in modern educational parlance, he worked with men and women at their developmental level; (2) he was aware of life around him, so he took his stories and examples from the daily life and experience of people; (3) he was opened to learning and its consequence: changing; (4) he was centered on God as the source of his authority.

1. **Jesus meets people where they are and thus enables them to be what they can be.** Perhaps the chief incentive Jesus provided his hearers to take him seriously was his compassion. It was his way of life. The Greek word splanchnizomai best captures the way Jesus meets people. The evangelists use it often. Literally, splanchnizomai means “to be moved in one’s bowels.” The Greeks regarded the bowels as the seat of violent passion such as anger and love while the Jews considered them as the center of the tender affections, especially kindness and pity. For them “bowels” were what we mean today by “heart.” Mark says, “As Jesus went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion (esplanchnisthe) on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things (6:34). By this he is saying that Jesus was moved in his bowels which means that his heart went out to the people and he met them where they were! No wonder people responded to him as they did, for his words came from the heart. They were liveable, believable, and life-giving!

Jesus also punctuated his words by doing a number of acts that meant something. His eating habits, for example, became a parable in action, for they emanated from his compassion. In fact, there is hardly a page in the Gospels that does not picture Jesus sitting at somebody’s table. Incredibly most of his companions were “outcasts!”

Given that sharing a meal in first-century Palestine signified acceptance of one’s table companions, Jesus’ behavior signified his acceptance of them. It must have been an extraordinary experience for an outcast to be invited to share a meal with a man who was rumored to be a prophet. He “spoke from the mouth of the Spirit” and therefore his acceptance of them would have been perceived as a claim that they were accepted by God. Implicit in the action is an understanding of God as gracious and compassionate, embracing even the outcasts, those whose mode of life placed them outside the bounds of respectability and acceptance established by conventional wisdom. Jesus’ table-fellowship with outcasts was an enacted parable of the grace of God, both expressing and mediating the divine grace.38

Jesus also taught the idea of compassion in his parables. Samaritans, for example, were a despised class; yet it is an unselfish Samaritan who is willing to care for one who otherwise would most likely spurn him (Lk 10:33). Or who can forget the father embracing his son who has gone on the road, living as if there were no tomorrow? He even throws a party “for his dead one who has come back to Life” (Luke 15:11-32). Then there is the employer who casts equity to the wind and pays laborers who worked a few hours at the same rate as those who worked all day (Mt 20:1-16).

In every instance, Jesus’ illustrations offer a characterization of a compassionate God or an ideal after which people should model themselves. In fact, his story about the Good Samaritan ends with the injunction: “Go and do likewise!” (10:37).

2. Jesus is aware of life around him and he uses it to full advantage. Scripture tells us that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a hill town in Galilee, some twenty miles from the Sea of Galilee and roughly one hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Most of his neighbors would have been farmers who lived in the village and who worked in the fields nearby. Later, he made his home in the seaside village of Capernaum where his neighbors were fishers. The gospels tell us Jesus was a tekton, i.e., a craftsperson in stone, wood or metal; so he neither fished nor farmed. Yet his words indicate that he must have known a lot about both industries, since he uses many examples of these trades in his teaching. Sayings such as “A city set on a hill cannot be hid” or “No one lights a lamp and hides it under a bushel” also derive from everyday experience. Likewise, Jesus uses aspects of nature as standards for teaching. For example: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more

value than they?” (Mt 6:26) or “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you?” (Mt 6:28-30). In each instance, whether through parable, proverbs, or lessons from nature, Jesus used everyday realities to invite his hearers to see things differently. And more often than not, he took these familiar experiences and drove home his point by standing these realities on their head!

3. Jesus is open to learning and its consequence: changing. Parker Palmer suggests that to learn, one must face transformation. It is an experience Jesus under-

---

39 Sloyan, 106.

40 Borg, 98, suggests that Jesus’ teaching ordinarily did not take the form of elaborating or commenting on the Torah, though he obviously knew it and sometimes referred to it. Rather than appealing to sacred text or citing opinions of earlier teachers, he most often appealed to the world of human experience or made observations about nature. As he did so, he used the typical forms of the earlier wisdom tradition.

went himself. Scholars believe that Jesus was originally a disciple of John the Baptist whose fiery message of a punishing God and the need for repentance influenced his early teaching. The Torah, the primary source of conventional wisdom in Jesus’ day, consisted of 613 written laws that if

In the age of instant learning through technology, students are searching for more than a professional competence from their teachers. They are seeking truth...

followed brought blessings and concomitantly, if violated, did not. Moreover, people were expected to live within very defined expectations and limits heightened after the Roman arrival into Palestine in 63 B.C.E. In response to the threat produced by this occupation, the Pharisees adapted a “Politic of Holiness” to keep the land holy. This strategy in turn emphasized the need of the pious to keep “separate.” Categories such as clean and unclean, purity and defilement, sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner became key to its fulfillment. “Sinners,” that is, any people who violated the law in any way, were to be avoided. Galilee was full of them! For the combined total of Jewish and Roman taxes imposed on farmers (up to 35% of their earnings) caused many of them to become “nonobservant” Jews in their religious practices. This was not due to the attractiveness of Roman and Hellenistic ways but to economic pressures. Jesus’ subsequent encounter with these farmers led him to see the limitation of the “conventional wisdom.” Thus, his perceptions changed, and with it his rhetoric. For men and women whom society branded “sinners” were no longer seen by him to be so. In fact, they had been sinned against! It is in this discovery, in this transforming grace, that Jesus’ message changed from “Repent” to “Come follow me.” Furthermore, his way of “inclusion,” i.e. everyone has a place at God’s table, models a challenge to the traditional thinking. His “New World Order,” a.k.a. the “reign of God,” becomes a way of transformation. It is the heart of his teaching.

There is a timeless quality to much of what he said, simply because the alternative way which he taught not only stood in tension with his social world but also in opposition to the conventional wisdom of any time. Though he was not a systematic theologian or philosopher who divided his teaching into various topics, his sagely teaching nevertheless revolved around three great themes: an image of reality that challenged the image created by conventional wisdom; a diagnosis of the human condition; and the proclamation of a way of transformation.

Some people listened because they could see he lived his message; others were so threatened by the same message that they killed him.

---

42 See Borg, 79-96, for the backdrop to this statement.
44 Borg, 99.
4. Jesus is centered on God as the Source of his authority. The Gospels portray Jesus as a man of prayer who regularly withdraws into lonely places to pray (Mk 1:35; 6:46; Lk 5:16). In fact, Luke shows Jesus communing with God before every major decision (3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 29; 22:32, 34; 23:46). Moreover, he implies that the olive grove of Gethsemane is his customary refuge of prayer (22:39). This regular communication with his Father whom he called Abba is the fire that kept him focused. Through prayer he entered a silence and solitude so deeply that he could hear the whole world’s speech and feel the whole world’s connections. He touched that transcendent Spirit from whom all things arise and to whom all things return and who makes all things kindred as they go. It was the source of his authority.

In a recent article, “The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching,” Parker Palmer asserts this importance of prayer in a teacher’s life, remarking that teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge, and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and subject.

Jesus’ own good teaching is the result of his prayer and his intimate relationship with God.

Jesus vis à vis teachers today

People came in droves to hear Jesus be-cause he spoke like an original thinker and not like a professional scholar.

That means that he did not spin out endless interpretations of difficult texts and solve artificially complicated questions of casuistry (like the one the Sadducees asked him, about the woman who had seven successive husbands and met them all in heaven), but that he gave people positive advice, on which they could remake their lives. He knew the canonical books intimately, quoted them often, and was never caught in ignorance of them or misunderstanding. Yet he had apparently gone beyond them to build a new doctrine, which he conceived as completing the teachings that had guided his nation until then.

Crowds followed him everywhere to listen. Jesus offered people the hope that their lives could be different, along with a sense of acceptance that gave them the courage to begin to make that difference. Perhaps this is what students need most from us today. For in the age of instant learning through technology, students are searching for more than a professional competence from their teachers. They are seeking truth along with an encouragement from us that will give them the boldness they need to continue their questing.

A teacher, not some theory, is the living link in this epistemological chain. The way a teacher plays the mediator role conveys both an epistemology and an ethic to the student, both an approach to knowing and an approach to living. I may teach the rhetoric of freedom, but if I teach it ex cathedra, asking my students to rely solely on the authority of “the facts” and demanding that they imitate authority on their papers and exams, I am teaching a slave ethic. I am

45 Palmer, 124.
47 Highet, 192.
forming students who know neither how to learn in freedom nor to live freely, guided by an inner sense of truth. 44

This does not mean that we should turn away from facts and theories, but we must teach more than a body of knowledge or a set of skills. People who write about education often point out that the root meaning of “to educate” is “to draw out” and that the teacher’s task is not to fill a student’s mind with facts but to evoke the truth he or she holds within them; a truth that is both personal and communal. 49 For long after their course work is completed and the facts have faded from their minds, it is the discovered truth they found within themselves that they will remember.

Years ago I read a lovely story that has always stuck with me. It concerns the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, whom the President of Haverford College invited to come and speak to the faculty and students, long before ecumenical and interfaith exchanges were popular. Before his talk, however, the whole college was to attend a Quaker prayer meeting which was based on corporate silence. Buber was told that he could break this silence with a brief message if the Spirit quickened him to do so, to which he replied that although he knew the procedure, as a guest, he would never dream of doing so.

The meeting convened and after ten minutes the president of the college rose and spoke of what a great thing it was that men and women could meet each other across barriers of race, of nationality, of economic status, of age, and could reach out and touch each other. He amplified this by several telling illustrations. He had hardly sat down when Martin Buber rose in his place, looking with his beard and his strong face and piercing eyes as an Old Testament prophet, and after leisurely taking in the whole group with his eyes, he began to speak, saying that although it was a great thing to transcend barriers and to meet another human being, the meeting of another across a barrier was not the greatest thing one person could do for another. There was still something far greater. For the greatest thing, he continued, that any person could do for another is to confirm the deepest thing he or she has within them. After this he sat down for there was little more to say. 50

To do this, however, as Palmer suggests, teachers must create space in their classrooms where ‘obedience to the truth’ can be practiced. 53 The Greek word for ‘to obey’ (hypakouo) shows us a way. For hidden within this word is a second word akouo that means ‘to hear.’ Students can only obey what they hear, and they can only hear if there are silences. Furthermore, Jesus’ example provides a means toward which teachers can create an environment that is conducive to learning: (1) He met people where they are; (2) He was aware of life around him and used people’s daily life experiences as examples; (3) He was open to learning with its consequence: changing; (4) He was centered on God as a source of his authority. His injunction “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) challenges us!

---

48 Palmer, 29-30.  
49 Palmer, 43.  
Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.