



THE TEACHER *PAR EXCELLENCE*:

What is a role model? A role model is a person who influences, inspires, and motivates us—someone who lives a life others admire. Adults may give little thought to having role models, but many have mentors—individuals whom they trust to guide them forward. Usually, we think of children and young people as those who need adult role models. However, if we examine those who influence us most and why, we will realize that they are people who stimulate our thinking and provide us with important life lessons. A well-known proverb says: “You are what you eat.” A variation of this saying might be to state: “We are disciples of what [or whom] we pay attention to.”¹

Matthew’s Jesus as a Role Model for Teachers

Several teachers have shaped my thinking and deeply influenced my approach not only to teaching and academia, but also to life. While these individuals made a difference, my utmost role model is Jesus Christ, the teacher *par excellence*.

Jesus as a Teacher

In the New Testament, the concept of Jesus as a Savior is more prominent than His portrait as a teacher. This fact, however, does not suggest that the significance of the “teaching Jesus” is marginalized, and this is reflected in an analysis of titles applied to Jesus. The most frequent title used is “Lord” (*kurios*), applied to Him 83 times, but the second most frequent is “teacher” (*didaskalos* or *rabbi*), represented 56 times.²

BY LASZLO GALLUSZ

According to the research by Pheme Perkins, ancient literature mentions four types of teachers during Jesus' time who had adult followers: (1) philosophers; (2) sages; (3) interpreters of the Jewish law; and (4) prophets. He points out that elements of Jesus' teaching reflect features from all four of these categories.³ While in recent decades gospel studies have devoted significant attention to comparing Jesus with Cynic teachers and charismatic itinerant preaching figures, the differences are stronger than the similarities.⁴ The category of teachers that comes closest to the picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels is that of the Jewish rabbis. However, in spite of a number of similarities with first-century rabbis, the differences are so fundamental that Jesus could rightly be considered radically different in His teaching style and content.⁵ His unique contribution and far-reaching impact qualify Him as the teacher *par excellence*.

Matthew's Teaching Jesus

In the rest of this article, we will focus on Matthew's portrait of Jesus as a teacher. This, more than the other canonical Gospels, can be considered a teaching Gospel. In the early church, it was the most beloved and the most quoted of the four books.⁶ In Matthew, we find the most complete and systematic account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As noted by Paul Minear, "The author of this Gospel was a *teacher* who designated his work to be of maximum help to teachers in Christian congregations."⁷

The teaching character of Matthew's Jesus surfaces in at least two vital features:

1. *The structure of the Gospel.* The Book of Matthew is shaped by a pattern of alternating discourses and narratives. It presents five of Jesus' major sermons—all focusing on the central theme of His teaching and preaching: the kingdom of God (chapters 5 to 7, 10, 13, 18, 24 to 25).⁸ Some have seen in these five discourses parallels to the five books of Moses, which are here delivered by the New Moses.⁹ The number of instructional lessons is high in comparison to the other synoptic Gospels.

2. *The progression of educational formation.* In the overall flow of Matthew's Gospel, we notice the following stages: Jesus calls disciples; teaches them; sends them out in the field to practice for some time, then teaches them again; they find themselves in situations in which they are tested; and finally, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus sends them out to continue His teaching ministry.¹⁰

Lessons for Teachers

I would like to propose five distinctive lessons from Jesus' practice and ministry of teaching that can be gleaned from His sermons recorded in Matthew. While this is not a comprehensive study of Jesus' teaching methods, it reflects general lessons that surface in the study of Matthew's instructional materials.¹¹ These lessons are not limited only to the Book of Matthew; some of them surface in the other Gospels as well.

1. *Jesus met people where they were; He was constantly attuned to the life experiences of those around Him.* As He taught, Jesus did not begin with a systematic set of teachings

that were discussed in a certain time-frame. He did not have a well-prepared syllabus from which every item had to be covered. Jesus was oriented toward the context in which people lived: He began with the questions and life situations of His audience. He capitalized on the well-known scenes and experiences of His contemporaries. Such an approach gave His teaching freshness and newness, making it different from the teaching of the trained scholars of His time. One of the best illustrations of this principle can be found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), which is considered one of the greatest sermons in human history.¹² The application of the principle, however, surpasses this discourse, as is evident from the comment of Alban Goodier: "He speaks of their everyday joys and sorrows, the salt of their everyday meal; the village perched up there on the hill above and the candlesticks in the windows; their daily conversation with its oaths and loose language; their household quarrels; the local thief; the local borrower of money; the sun now beating down upon them, the rain which had but recently ceased; the rust and moth which were a constant trouble; their dogs, their fish, their eggs. . . . He has said what he said in the language of their lives."¹³

Since Jesus spoke to people in their language, in their situation, and considered their problems, it is no wonder that the common people were attracted to Him. His approach was a message itself that authentic religion is not only for the privileged or sophisticated, but should be understandable and available for ordinary people, who in His time were despised by the scribes as unable to comprehend really important and complex issues. Jesus had an amazing capacity to explain the most profound truths and issues in the language understood by ordinary people. He normally avoided difficult, philosophical terminology and put His finger on the central issues challenging His audience. It was not only the content of His teaching that attracted a crowd, but even more His personality, as He accepted the people, loved them, and believed in them.¹⁴

2. *Instead of abstract training, Jesus provided education for life.* He taught people how to think and how to live. His education shaped the core values of His audience. It was an "invitation to human intelligence and freedom,"¹⁵ and a call to action! Matthew's Gospel shows Jesus summing up religion in this powerful and positive statement: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12, NRSV).¹⁶ Jesus helped people to see life with God's eyes and cast a radical vision of reality:

- In the Sermon on Mount (chapters 5-7), He redefined the idea of happiness, suggesting that the happy person is the one who is considered happy by God, not by the Romans or by the local authorities. The eight macarisms ("Blessed are the . . .") at the beginning of the sermon cast light on happiness from the perspective of Jesus (the meaning of Greek *makarios* is not only "blessed" but also "happy"): happy are those who see their need and turn to God, and who demonstrate qualities reflecting God's character as meekness, mercy, purity, etc. (Matthew 5:3-12).

- In the Missionary Sermon (chapter 10), He pointed out His disciples' responsibility for transmitting the values and ideals of the kingdom so that people within their sphere of

influence could be transformed and, as a result, the world would become a better place.

• In His Apocalyptic Sermon (chapters 24 and 25), He called attention to the history of the world heading toward a purposeful end, making it necessary to use wisely the God-given opportunities and live in light of the coming of the *parousia*.

3. Jesus fostered person-centered education, inspiring people to grow and become better versions of themselves.

He was more concerned with the kind of person one should be than with the things one should possess. He believed in people, saw potential in them, and gave them sound directions they could use to rebuild their lives. Jesus offered people hope that their lives could be different; and this hope, along with the sense of acceptance, gave them courage to think and change.

Today, we live in an age of instant learning in which information is easily accessible to students; therefore, teachers are not necessary for transmitting cognitive data. However, the “students are searching for more than a professional competence from their teachers.”¹⁷ They are seeking to discover what is real and also receive motivation and encouragement to enter boldly into unknown areas (at least for them) by questioning. Parker Palmer rightly notes: “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.”¹⁸

Reading the Gospels leads us to the conclusion that Jesus was concerned with *how* to think, not just *what* to think. This was unique to His approach in comparison with the teachers of His time. His interactions with ordinary people inspired and encouraged them to start thinking for themselves and making their own decisions. That meant daring to question common assumptions, examining the thinking behind the rules, and forming an opinion regarding their relative importance. He often inspired thinking by using parables and by introducing questions that compelled His audience to actively participate.¹⁹ In the Gospel of Matthew, He raised the “what do you think” questions five times (Matthew 17:25; 18:12; 21:28; 22:17, 42). Examples of His other thought-provoking questions include: “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matthew 5:46); “Why are you talking about having no bread?” (Matthew 16:8); “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). While Adventist teachers should not turn away from teaching facts and theories (these are certainly

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needed), they must teach more than a body of knowledge or a set of skills. Jesus wanted to see transformation in people with whom He interacted: transformation of their thinking and their lives.

4. Jesus called attention to the importance of honoring both established truth and innovation. The discourse on the Parables of the Kingdom (chapter 13) is concluded by the following statement: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52). In this text, Jesus announced a new principle for disciples of the kingdom. The context of this sermon implies that the “new” things refer to the new teachings associated with Jesus, while the “old” things signify the teachings of the Torah. A disciple of Jesus needs to discern the value of both. While we rejoice in seeing new things happening, established truth is not to be left behind. A virtue of a disciple is to learn to appreciate the best of both worlds and try to hold the two together for a church that is in need of both. Troy Troftgruben rightly con-

cludes: “Faithful ministry entails both a sense of the past as well as vision for the future. Abrogating either of these threatens the vibrancy of the whole. In teaching, proclaiming, and ministering. . . [L]eaders [are called] to be ‘masters’ of both worlds, drawing on both old and new for the sake of serving as discerning teachers.”²⁰

5. Jesus stressed the importance of fostering community where special status among the members has no significant place. In biblical anthropology, human beings are not viewed as isolated islands; they function in a context of relationships of different types.²¹ Living in an individualistic culture, it is easy to forget that the focus of attention is not on an individual, but on a community and on our contribution to it through serving, as modeled by Jesus, our example (1 John 3:16). The Master Teacher’s fourth and fifth sermons in Matthew’s Gospel (greatness in the kingdom [chapter 18] and the apocalyptic discourse [chapters 24 and 25]) highlight that we are to treat others in the community according to the values modeled by Christ. These sermons emphasize the values of humility, forgiveness, concern for others, acting with integrity, treating people with dignity, and serving others. By putting into practice all these values, we foster community. We should not forget that Jesus directly associated Himself not only with the so-called people of influence, but also with the “least”: the least important, the least impressive, and the least recognized, who in fact through their experience with Jesus as

recorded in the Gospels have exerted untold influence through Christian history. The bottom line is that we should treat students with no less dignity, care, and grace than we would treat Christ Himself.

Conclusion

Lin Norton defines four categories of teachers: (1) Mediocre teachers tell their students what to do; (2) Good teachers explain to their students; (3) Superior teachers demonstrate to their students; and (4) Great teachers inspire their students.²² The influence of a great teacher can never be erased. Teachers shape the thinking and lives of young people not only with the content being taught, but also through their example. Therefore, an Adventist teacher has not only an academic task, but also a spiritual vocation. Regardless of our area of expertise, Jesus' example in teaching stands as an inspiring model in relating to students, as well as helping them grow and see the world in a different light.

This article has suggested five lessons from Matthew's portrait of the teaching Jesus, which serve as directions for Christian teachers of our time in fulfilling their vocation: (1) meeting the students where they are; (2) providing them education for life, instead of abstract training; (3) fostering person-centered education by inspiring students to grow; (4) honoring both established truth and innovation; and (5) fostering community. Let's follow the example of the Teacher *par excellence!* ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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in the Book of Revelation has been published in the Library of New Testament Studies series (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014). He is the author of three books and a number of scholarly articles in English, Hungarian, and Serbian.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Laurence Freeman, *Jesus, the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 172.
2. Conducting a simple word search using any Bible software such as *BibleWorks: A Software for Biblical Exegesis and Research* (<http://www.bibleworks.com/>) will produce similar results.
3. PHEME PERKINS, *Jesus as Teacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 2-22.
4. The initiative was part of the "third quest" of the historical Jesus, which had an agenda to analyze Jesus in the context of first-century Judaism. For a concise overview of the quest of the historical Jesus as one of the main interests of the New Testament scholarship in the past hundred years, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus:*

A Comprehensive Guide, John Bowden, trans. (London: SCM, December 1998), pp. 1-15.

5. For an analysis of similarities and differences between Jesus and the first-century rabbis, see e.g., Marie Noël Keller, "Jesus the Teacher," *Currents in Mission and Theology* 25:6 (1998):450-460.

6. Gerd Theissen, *The New Testament: A Literary History*, Linda M. Maloney, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), p. 142.

7. Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003), p. 3.

8. For a discussion of the Gospel of Matthew's structure and its function, see David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

9. While there is scholarly agreement that Jesus is presented in the fashion of a New Moses in Matthew's Gospel, the typological fulfillment should not be pressed too far. Namely, Benjamin W. Bacon's *Studies in Matthew* (London: Constable, 1930) suggestion that the First Gospel is to be understood as a kind of "Christian Pentateuch," since Jesus' five discourses are modelled after the five books of Moses, is vulnerable on several grounds. The major weakness of this hypothesis is that it relegates two key sections of the Gospel, the birth and the passion narratives, to a status of prologue and epilogue.

10. For a slightly different educational formation scheme, see Troy M. Troftgruben, "Lessons for Teaching From the Teacher: Matthew's Jesus on Teaching and Leading Today," *Currents in Mission and Theology* 40:6 (December 2013):387-398.

11. For an in-depth study of Jesus' teaching methods, see Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995); Liv Fønnebo, "A Grounded-theory Study of the Teaching Methods of Jesus: An Emergent Instructional Model" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 2011): <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1368&context=dissertations>.

12. For a brief orientation on the history of influence of the Sermon on the Mount, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1989-2005), pp. 177-181.

13. Alban Goodier, *The Public Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbournet, 1930), pp. 230ff.

14. Jesus' acceptance of people is probably most evident in His eating habits and His table fellowships. For an in-depth study of the topic, see János Bolyki, *Jesu Tischgemeinschaften* WUNT, 2/96 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998).

15. Sean P. Kealy, "Jesus, the Unqualified Teacher," *African Ecclesiastical Review* 19:4 (1977):228-233.

16. Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Bible texts credited to NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.

17. Keller, "Jesus the Teacher," op. cit., p. 459.

18. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 29.

19. The rhetorical impact of Jesus' teaching in parables is a topic for itself, which is beyond the scope of this study. For an in-depth treatment of this topic, see e.g., David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Jesus Library; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1989); Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990); Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998).

20. Troftgruben, "Lessons for Teaching From the Teacher," op. cit., p. 395.

21. See Paul B. Petersen, "'Unwholly' Relationships: Unity in a Biblical Ontology," in "What Are Human Beings That You Remember Them?" *Proceedings of the Third International Bible Conference, Nof Ginosar and Jerusalem, June 11-21, 2012*, Clinton Wahlen, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), pp. 235-248.

22. Quoted in Francine Anuarite K. Wasukundi, "Pedagogy of Jesus for Modern World Christian Teachers," *African Ecclesiastical Review* 54:3-4 (2012):262-284.