

# Jesus and the Parables

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## A Compelling Oral Training Tool

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### **About the Author**

Pastor Kevin Olson is working on his Doctorate of Ministry in Servant Leadership Development at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, MN. He has been serving as the director of the Ambassador Institute based out of Plymouth, MN since it began in 2007. In the past seven years, the Ambassador Institute has been establishing oral training centers in Uganda and India. There are currently 250 students in Uganda and 53 in India. This paper is the result of his experience in both of these countries as well as his studies at Bethel Seminary.

## Introduction of a Useful Tool

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For the Christian community, the life of Jesus is lifted up as a model to follow for ministry methods. His mandate to make disciples is a preeminent theme for missions and his Word is the foundation for everything that is taught. The student that takes time to look closely into the life and ministry of Jesus can also learn from the methods that he used. *Jesus used parables to make disciples, teach the people, bridge cultures, reveal scriptures, and to transform lives.* This unique oral teaching style has the potential to change ministry vision and practice. Jesus was intentional in his use of parables and we, his disciples, must also unlock the potential behind this technique.

The ministry of Jesus provides a unique look at the use of an oral training method. He used parables and questions regularly as he trained his disciples and taught the masses. Jesus was able to train disciples from a wide variety of backgrounds, multiple languages, and multiple cultures. Even though the bulk of his ministry was focused in the region of Galilee, scripture records that “the people still came to him from everywhere,” (Mark 1:45, NIV).

The use of oral training has a relatively short modern history, but its use in biblical history goes back to the beginning of the Bible. It has been used to pass down history, preserve theology, train leaders, and jump the boundaries of time and culture. Looking closely at Jesus’ approach can validate this method as an essential cross-cultural tool for missions, a powerful technique for biblical students, and a revolutionary method for communicating across language barriers.

## For Making Disciples

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The goal of making disciples was central to the work that Jesus was doing. It is possible to educate people so that they know God’s Word, understand doctrine, can pass tests and train others but yet miss the goal

of making disciples. A simple summary. *A disciple is more than one who knows about Jesus, a disciple is one who is becoming like Jesus.* The goal of transformation is at the core of the use of parables.

One aspect of the use of the parables is to pass on the **knowledge** of the Word of God. It must become a part of the person. As a disciple grows in the knowledge of God's Word, they gain a full understanding of who he is, which also affects who they are. If someone gains the knowledge of God, it will also affect their **character**. The parables uniquely allow a person to see themselves in the story and learn from the people that are illustrated throughout the Bible. The biblical narratives are descriptive of real life and oral learners can understand the results of their actions through the living examples in scripture. The change of a person's character will next be reflected in their **life and ministry**. Love for others, a desire to share God's Word, and a servant spirit are evidence of God's work in the heart of a disciple. The parables are unique in their non-threatening approach to evangelism or outreach and it becomes a natural outflow of the change that has taken place within.

Making disciples is about walking through life with people in such a way that they gain the knowledge of God's Word, their character reflects their Lord and the way that they live is patterned after Jesus. Luke 6:40 says, "Everyone who is fully trained will be *like his teacher*," (Luke 6:40, NIV).

If the goal of training is for disciples to make disciples, then an oral training model must be given serious consideration. Jesus himself started with twelve, then sent out seventy-two, and after his death there were more than five hundred. After Peter's address at Pentecost, three thousand were added to their number. The oral style of training is not solely responsible for this multiplication, but it is the primary tool that Jesus used and it is the way the early disciples passed on what Jesus had taught them.

Avery Willis is often considered the father of the modern oral training emphasis. He wrote and spoke often about the value of oral training. In his book, *Truth that Sticks*, Willis (2010:127) states, "[Jesus'] disciple making was not accidental; it was intentional. . . . Jesus intends for us to make disciples as He did. It was His work, and now it is our work. If we follow His example we will intentionally make disciples as He did."

In February of 2009, a biblical oral training program was begun in Uganda called the Ambassador Institute. The training was modeled in part after the parable and question style that Jesus used in order to memorize eighty-four stories with a total of 2200 verses of the Bible.

After two years of study, in January 2011, twenty students completed the entire course. From that group, eight of the graduates became teachers and started seven new classes. The original teacher mentored the eight new teachers so that they could teach the lessons well.

The second class completed their studies in January, 2013 with seventy-one graduates. Out of that class, twenty-five signed up to be teachers and twenty-two classes were started. The next student body will be finishing in the spring of 2015 with two hundred and fifty completing their two years of study.

After the first graduation, Musasazi Wilson (2013), chairman of the students, began to teach three classes. One time he walked three hours to reach the class because his bicycle had broken down. When asked, “Why do you give your time and energy to train others?” He said, “When you have tasted something that is sweet like honey, you want to share it with others.”

An oral approach such as Jesus used in the parables can make disciples, but it can also make disciples who in turn make other disciples. It is a training that is deep enough to give the profound truths of God yet it is simple and accessible enough for anyone who is willing to *walk with Jesus* through his Word. It will transform the character of the student so that when he or she is fully trained, they will be like their teacher.

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## For Teaching People

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The purpose of the parable can be seen in both the characteristics of the parables and the manner in which Jesus used them. They were brief stories, sometimes as small as an object lesson. They were simple and repetitive, easy to remember and easy to recite again to others. They were made up of objects, examples and experiences from the crowd’s normal daily life. They often connected to the Old Testament and the Kingdom

of God. They were engaging for listeners at multiple levels, and the people were shocked, surprised, and challenged. They were appealing and relevant, (Terry 2009:Front Cover).

Warren Wiersbe describes the parables as both mirrors and windows. “As mirrors, they help us see ourselves. They reveal our lives as they really are. As windows, they help us see life and God. You may not have an easy time identifying with some truth in Romans 7 or Ephesians 2, but you probably have little difficulty seeing yourself in one of the parables,” (Wiersbe 1979:14). That describes the beauty and the power of the parable. It can be easily understood, easily identified with, and yet pointed and revealing.

Ultimately the purpose of the parable is to teach the people. To do so, they must show us an image of ourselves and a vision of what is beyond. They must engage the listener, connect them to what they know and unveil the mysteries of what they do not understand.

The potential of the parable is in the fact that it is the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says that it is “living and active sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Jesus cut right to the core of peoples’ heart. He exposed their motives, and he revealed their hidden agendas.

Jesus used the parables to describe the kingdom of God. In Matthew 13, Jesus portrays a picture of the kingdom of God. He portrays the small seed of faith that grows into a large tree and the bread dough that rises in the pan. He entices the curious to dig for the treasure and seek for the jewel. Finally, he cautions those listening regarding the fact that the judgment is just as real as the anticipated kingdom. In a few short word pictures, Jesus drew in the listener and illustrated a spiritual realm that they couldn’t even imagine.

The parables have the potential to teach people the Word of God. They can uncover the mysteries of doctrine and cut to the heart of human beings because it is God who is working in and through his Word. This makes it a unique tool for instructing people and a useful tool to bridge cultures.

## For Connecting Cultures

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Jesus faced some enormous cultural barriers as he taught radical new concepts. The church was to be built on a living relationship with their heavenly father along with the religion and ritual that they had learned from the rabbinic tradition. Along with the new picture of God was a new revelation of how Jesus saw the various levels of society. Instead of viewing some as less important and others as more important because of their prominence or position, Jesus used a child as the example for his disciples, (Matthew 18:1-5).

Jesus continued his cultural transformation by describing a new set of priorities, the kingdom of heaven, the example of love, the treatment of enemies, the cost of being a disciple, the strength of small faith, the investment of our time and talents, and his own return. Jesus also needed to empower his disciples to pass on what they had received. Jesus empowered fishermen, tax collectors and common people with that life-changing message instead of the synagogue rulers, the Pharisees, or the scribes. These common people would be taking on the role of communicating the Word of God.

It is helpful to consider the challenge that Jesus faced in communicating these radical new concepts to people. The kingdom that Jesus needed to reveal to his disciples was profoundly different from anything they had previously conceived of. The challenge that Jesus faced in trying to pass on information to his disciples was far beyond just a language or a cultural barrier and the nature of the topic was a matter of eternal consequences.

The parables show that Jesus was fully acquainted with human life in its multiple ways and means. He was knowledgeable in farming, sowing seed, detecting weeds, and reaping a harvest. He was at home in the vineyard, knew the times of reaping fruit from vine and fig tree, and was aware of the wages paid for a day's work. Not only was he familiar with the workaday world of the farmer,

the fisherman, the builder, and the merchant, but he moved with equal ease among the managers of estates, the ministers of finance at a royal court, the judge in a court of law, the Pharisees, and the tax collectors. He understood Lazarus's poverty, yet he was invited to dine with the rich," (Kistemaker 2002:12-13).

Jesus was able to flow between these various strata of society and relate to each as if there was no social barrier between them. The parables made the connection between them possible because they relate to people on a personal level. The human condition shows that inside there is much in common regardless of how society may view the layers. The challenge of reaching people where they are at is the heart of missions and the modern orality movement is making an impact on the methods that are being used to cross cultures.

Culture is what gives us identity and makes us unique, but culture also separates us from one another. "Culture is what defines a group of people that have similar education levels, beliefs, customs, language and communication methods. Culture connects us, gives us a sense of belonging, familiarity and peace" (Snead 2013:42-43). Yet culture makes it difficult for people to understand one another. Finding a bridge to communicate across these barriers is the goal and the challenge of missions. "Culture becomes the key to unlocking the hearts of people all over the world. Studying it illuminates strategies ordained by God to reach people in their own setting" (Snead 2013:43). The power of the parable and oral communication can be the key to unlock the hearts of people around the world.

Jesus bridged the culture gap from God to man. He, himself was a cultural bridge, but he also used the parables as another bridge. Jesus described the indescribable with common every day terms. He created a picture of God that humans could grasp. He presented things in such a way that it would be sought after like a precious jewel.

## For Living Communication

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A young boy was marveling at a butterfly that he saw floating in the air, going from flower to flower. It moved effortlessly and had a beauty that was captivating. The brilliant colors of the wings were stunning; the fluid motion of its flight was magnificent. He longed to keep it and show it to his friends, so he caught it and took it apart. He took off the wings and put them in one pile, the legs in another pile, the antenna and the body in another pile so that he could show his friends; but in doing so, he killed the butterfly.

That story illustrates what we can do to the living, breathing narratives of the Bible. We dissect them into several parts in order to show our friends. A sermon on a parable is given a title, three points, sub points and a concluding application, but the living Word is killed. Where is the encounter with the story and all of its emotion, awe, and wonder? Where is the anticipation of the wedding, the buried treasure, the friend knocking on the door in the middle of the night, and the man lying half dead on the side of the road? Where is the longing father as he waits for his son and the tenants killing the son of the landowner? A parable communicates more than just information, it is an experience with God.

Jesus left lasting memories in the minds of the disciples and the ministry that has multiplied throughout the world is evidence of its effectiveness. Scholars have studied the parables of Jesus and come to various conclusions regarding how they should be understood and interpreted, but the beauty of the parable is its inherent life apart from dissection, categorization, or systemization. It is important to consider a detailed analysis of these teachings but it is also important to step back and look at the parables, simple as they are.

Gilles Gravelle published an article in *Orality Journal* on how the brain understands meaning. In it he highlights the fact that the process of communicating is more than deciphering a group of symbols into words, it is more than transferring those words into sounds that make up a language. Communication happens when meaning gets transferred from one person to another. This study addresses where meaning resides and how is it communicated.



Studies using MRI imaging suggest that meaning is made in our minds through simulation. ... Simulation involves seeing. Our visual system sees non-present things in the 'mind's eye' in the same way it sees present things in the world. So this means that thinking is performing. When you are seeing it in the mind's eye, you are performing it in your mind, too. When you hear language about things, like the action of running, you use the same brain pathways to visualize it as if you were actually doing it. It's not just vague perception. You construct very detailed meaning. You hear a sound in your mind. You see an action happening. You imagine a result (Gravelle 2013:49-50).

In a parable or an oral story, meaning is transferred directly from the one sharing to the one receiving. Instead of deciphering and processing information, the mind can go directly to the meaning because it is simulating the information that the person sharing is conveying. "If we use our brain systems for perception and action to understand, then the processes of meaning are dynamic and constructive. It's not about activating the right symbol; it's about dynamically constructing the right experience" (Bergen 2012:16). The mental visualization is the meaning. Both oral processors and print media processors mentally simulate the things that they hear or read, according to Benjamin Bergen, (Gavelle 2013:52).

This means that Jesus' use of parables had a benefit beyond the goal of relating to people or sharing stories that would be easy to remember. It means that the parables gave the people the chance to experience the events Jesus was telling them. The people were able to hear the information, but they were also able to enter into the story, to see the events unfold, to feel the emotion and respond as the people in the parable would respond. Oral processing is an active dynamic transformational process.

## **For Transforming Lives**

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The gospel's own record describes an exciting response from the recipients of Jesus and his teaching. Jesus was connecting with his hearers. Their response reveals that he was getting their attention.

Matthew 7:35: “The crowds were amazed at his teaching.”

Matthew 31:54: “they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked.”

Luke 4:22: “All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips.”

Luke 4:32: “They were amazed at His teaching, because his message had authority.”

It would make sense for them to be amazed at the miracles. We would expect their astonishment when the blind see, the lame walk, and the dead are raised to life, but repeatedly, the crowd is amazed at his teaching. Their descriptions include wisdom, gracious words, and authority. They were not just impressed with a polished orator. They could see that what Jesus said was right and good. His words reflected an insightful application, a compelling inviting tone in contrast to that of the Pharisees. Even the parables carried with them authority.

The images, objects, and settings from these stories made God’s Word come alive. These down-to-earth illustrations communicated deep spiritual truths, and the people responded. The crowd represented the full range of people; children, farmers, fisherman, widows, soldiers, Pharisees, rich and poor together. The parables included the same characters. Jesus spoke to a diverse audience and his parables reflected the same diversity yet all of them were able to understand him. “It is of fundamental importance to remember that the parables of Jesus were spoken to ordinary folk. They were related to be understood by even the most simple person” (Scharlemann 1963:30).

The disciples responded to the parables by listening carefully and asking for clarification or explanation. Their desire for understanding shows that the Word was at work inside. They wanted and needed to know more. They were unwilling to leave the story until they understood.

The Pharisees also were affected by the parables but with a different response. Matthew 15:12 says, “Then the disciples came to Him and asked, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?’” In

Matthew 21:45-46 it says, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew that he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him” (Matthew 21:45-46, NIV).

There were many who followed Jesus who were transformed from their encounter with Jesus; Peter, Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, the woman at the well and the man born blind. The Bible does not directly connect the telling of parables to the changes in their lives except for the fact that it was the way that he communicated to the people. All of them had encountered Jesus and heard him speak to their hearts.

## Summary

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It is clear from looking at the parables of Jesus that they were an effective tool for him as he made disciples, taught the people, bridged the cultures, and transformed lives. What began with Jesus multiplied exponentially as those he trained passed on what they had learned to others. The recent return to the parables or oral training has the same potential for the modern mission movement and the church as a whole.

The parables are effective tools for passing on the knowledge of God, transforming the student’s character, and invigorating the ministry life of those involved. They work because they include the doctrine, the emotions, and the real lives of real people. When all three aspects of discipleship are woven together, the result will be a well-rounded disciple.

In the parables, we see a reflection of who we are as well as a window into the things of God. Jesus used them to stir the interest of the crowds and from that many began to follow him. The disciples took these illustrations seriously and wanted to know more. For them, Jesus was able to reveal the kingdom of God, but the Pharisees hardened their hearts to Jesus and could not see the glory that was right before them. To the one group the love of God was shown, to the unbelieving, his wrath was made known.

Jesus had to break through the traditions of man in order to let the living Word of God get out into people’s lives. The same may be needed today as people have grown accustomed to a certain form or method of

training. Jesus also faced challenges and yet he was able to work with people from many backgrounds. This revolution of thought needs to take place in missions as well as in education generally.

It is important to consider how people understand meaning and how thoughts are transferred from one person to another. It seems that the parables actually enhance understanding by recreating the experience in the mind of the listener. The fact is, a large percent of the population prefers to learn by methods other than the written text and there are many that cannot learn by reading.

It is possible to consider the parables and be amazed in the same way that the crowds responded. The real question is whether you will be changed by them. Many people were followers. Few became disciples.

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