

Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ

Lecture 10

Jesus, the Teacher (“Rabbi”)

Introduction

To the crowds, Jesus was Proclaimer, Healer and Miracle-worker. To them He was also “Rabbi” (Teacher), especially to His closest band of friends, His disciples.

As we read and study the life on Jesus in the Gospels, it becomes evident that His teaching ministry was not secondary to His ministries of deliverance, healing or compassion. Rather teaching and preaching were His primary ministry tasks. Note the clear link between “teaching” and “preaching”. Through His proclamation, Jesus instructed the crowds and His disciples in particular concerning the ways of God and of His kingdom.

Note once again the “authority” of Jesus in all aspects of His ministries both when He taught God’s truth as well as when He took authority over evil spirits, delivering those who were in bondage to their power and influence in their lives – see Luke 4:32; Mark 1:22.

Jesus was frequently addressed as “Rabbi”, an honorific title normally given to those who had been formally trained in the Pharisaic schools – see Luke 8:49; 9:38; 10:25; 18:18. Even His enemies addressed Him at times with the honoured title reserved for scholars learned in the Law – see Luke 11:45; 19:39; 20:21,28. Jesus’ own disciples sometimes used “Teacher” when addressing their Master – see Luke 21:7.

The element of Jesus’ teaching that stands out as having the widest influence or impact on subsequent generations both inside and outside the Church is **His ethical instruction**. Some non-Christian scholars (eg Jewish) have written about Jesus’ “ethical system or code.” However, in reality Jesus didn’t come to replace the OT moral code (i.e. Ten Commandments) with a new code of His own. Nor He did reject the legal codes of the Jewish state in His day (Mark 12:14f; Luke 20:22), or of the laws relating to

the Temple (Matt.17:24ff), or of Moses (Matt.5:17f; 23:2f). In many ways, He affirmed these.

However, Jesus stood opposed to some of the contemporary religious attitudes and practices of His day:

1. He opposed the identification of social ethics (rules governing behaviour within the commonwealth of Israel) with the obedience that every Jew owed to God's will – He denounced those who were willing to adopt the smallest of demands made upon them as citizens in a sinful society but who then saw this act of conformity as the expression of their obedience to God's Law.
2. He spoke out against the confusion of ritual act with moral response to God – Jesus was not opposed to rituals as such, eg He sent the cleansed leper to the temple (Mark 1:44). In His own life, He seems to have kept the rules governing ritual behaviour. However, to equate going through these rituals with obeying God was furthest from the truth. God required obedience from the heart, not in ritual or religious acts, eg Jesus showed through His response to those who forbade healing of the sick on the Sabbath (Mark 3:2-5) or forgiveness for prostitutes or tax collectors (Luke 5:29-32; 7:36-50) that they had totally misunderstood God's heart in giving His Law.

The central elements in Jesus' teaching are the following:

1. The new righteousness
2. The new commandment of love
3. The new revelation of God

1) THE NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus' standard of righteousness isn't just a more intense level of obedience to the law. Rather the standard is GOD Himself. See Matt.5:48. Jesus' teaching on righteousness wasn't "new" as far as God's revelation was concerned. However, it was a new message/teaching for the Jews of His day, a teaching that called them to a deeper level of obedience.

His teaching had a number of very important implications:

- Righteousness (living righteously) cannot be confined to a set, limited response. See Matt.5:21-22,27-28.
- Righteousness isn't just an external act but flows from within the heart. See Matt.12:35; 15:19-20. Righteous behaviour is only possible when a person has experienced a profound inward change. This will in turn affect the person's motivation to glorify God through how specific acts, cf. seeking for man's praise. See Matt.5:16; 6:1-6,16-18.
- Righteousness isn't just purely "internal", i.e. connected with a person's emotions. Rather it may be judged by the specific and visible deeds or changes that it produces in a person's life. See Matt.7:16-20.
- Righteousness according to Jesus' teaching for His followers claims the whole man – deeds, words, attitudes, thoughts, motivations. All these equally fall under the scrutiny of God. There are no actions or casual comments that "don't matter!" See Matt.12:36-37. *"What better index is there of a man's true character than his thoughtless word, his unguarded responses, or the action for which he has had no opportunity to prepare? At such moments he forgets his pretensions and inadvertently exposes his real self."* (New Testament Speaks, Glenn Barker, William Lane & J. Ramsey Michaels; Harper & Row, 1969, page 96)
- Righteousness in Jesus' teaching isn't about what we should *not* do. It is not about stopping certain bad habits but taking the initiative in obeying God's commands.
 - Jesus' call to become "peace-makers" not just "peace-keepers."
 - See Jesus' demand to the rich young ruler – not just to follow after Him but to sell everything and give the money to the poor – Luke 18:22.
 - Jesus condemns those who could have acted righteously but did nothing. See Luke 10:29-37 – Jesus' words of condemnation for the priest and Levite. *"Confronted with an opportunity to act in righteousness, they were unmoved by human need and unmotivated by their own understanding of the law. By doing nothing, they condemned themselves.... Jesus is not satisfied with anything less than the active expending of one's very life."* (NT Speaks: 96-97)

2) THE NEW COMMANDMENT

If Jesus' righteousness is rooted in the nature of God Himself, then this also means that this righteousness cannot be separated from love. Note Luke 10:25-28. Cf. Deut.6:5 &

Lev.19:18. The OT message about God and His love is about the greatness of His “unfailing love” towards sinful people (cf. Ps.103:8). Therefore, love is not to be interpreted as a truth revealed through the coming of Christ to offset an OT picture of God’s severity, holiness or wrath. The God revealed through the OT is the God who is also revealed through all the pages of the NT.

However, this dimension or truth was largely missing in the Judaism of Jesus’ day. Then it was “law” and adherence to laws plus the many traditions and additional requirements (248 commands of things to be done and 365 things prohibited along with countless applications and exceptions).

Jesus came to teach the truth and to expose the lie and falsehood. His call and command to love was a declaration of what is required of all those who follow Him and receive the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ teaching isn’t some abstract principle as the basis for a new ethical system. Love is primarily expressed through obeying God’s commands in one’s relationship with God (“Trust in God!”) and also in one’s relationships and daily interactions with one’s neighbours (“Love your enemies”).

This two-fold commandment (“Love God” and “love your neighbours”) cannot be interpreted as if these two commandments are of equal significance and importance or are essentially just two aspects of one commandment. Love for God is first and foremost. It precedes and determines one’s relationship to one’s neighbour. Therefore, a person cannot say: I have fulfilled Jesus’ great commandment by doing loving things for his neighbour. Jesus calls His followers to set one’s heart on loving God in that ultimate sense – a total commitment and abandon to for His sake. Cf. the loving act of the prostitute wiping Jesus – see Luke 7:36-50, ** v.47. However, because the believer loves God, he will also love his neighbour with sincerity.

It needs also to be understood that according to Jesus’ teaching, one cannot show love for one’s neighbour just for the sake of the Kingdom. This would turn our neighbour into some object instead of treating him as a real human being – simply a means for proving our love for God rather than loving that person for his/her sake.

Simply stated, in Jesus’ teaching, man is required to love God AND to love his neighbour. And he is required to love his neighbour with the same abandonment of self

with which he is summoned to love God: “Love your neighbour as *yourself*.” If God demands that we love Him with our total selves (mind, soul, strength etc.), then God expects that His people will also give themselves with a similar abandon in loving their neighbours.

Jesus taught this command, not with “statements” (stating principles), but rather with “illustrations”:

- Forgiving others including one’s enemies – Matt.5:44; cf. Luke 23:34 – in Jesus’ teaching, forgiveness connected with love has no set boundaries – Luke 17:3-4
- Not judging one’s neighbour – Matt.7:1-5
- Helping others in times of need – parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:30ff – in this illustration, the love owed one’s neighbour is radical in its expression in terms of sacrifice, offering all that one has – he is not controlled by sentimentality or emotion; rather he does what needs to be done regardless of how he feels – cf. Luke 10:37 “Go and do likewise!”

These illustrations underscore the profound difference between *eros* of the Hellenistic world and *agape* used in the biblical text:

- *eros* = a love that demands/gets (never once used in the NT)
- *agape* = a love that bestows/gives

3) THE NEW REVELATION OF GOD

In its strictest sense, Jesus’ teaching is based, not on some OT legal precepts, but upon theology, i.e. doctrine of God:

- God as Creator = principle governing His disciples’ behaviour towards evil men – Matt.5:44-47 (** V.45 “*He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*”)
- God as Provider/Carer = principle of care for human needs – Luke 12:22-24 (also 25-32); Matt.6:25-26.

Of all the truths that Jesus proclaimed concerning God, none is stronger than the proclamation of **God as FATHER**. The importance of this title can be seen from its frequency in the Gospels (66 times in the Synoptics and 118 in John). Though there are several references to God as “Father” in the OT or in His father-like qualities (see Psalm 103:13-14; Isaiah 63:16), the revelation of God as FATHER is distinctly Christian.

What Jesus did not teach or infer in His teaching about God as Father is that all people are offspring of the gods. In the OT, the people of Israel can speak about the fatherhood of God in the sense that by His own choice He brought their nation into being. In this sense, they may be likened to children of God – see Ex.4:22. The relationship is wholly based on God’s sovereign and supernatural choice and act. Cf. the great miracle of God calling out His “son” from Egypt – Hos.11:1, then sustaining him in the wilderness (Deut.1:31), disciplining him so that he might learn His commandments (Deut.8:5). When the son rebelled against him, God continued to hope for his return (Isaiah 1:2, 18f), and when he came in repentance, Father received him back gladly (Jer.31:9).

“This strand of OT faith underlies Jesus’ teaching on God as Father. God is not a heartless judge or unyielding tyrant but one who brings to his adopted sons infinitely more affection and concern than even the best of human fathers show toward their natural offspring.” (NT Speaks: 100)

- God as Father doesn’t think of His children in statistical terms – 99 sheep – Luke 15:11-32. Rather
 - He provides for their material necessities – Luke 12:23-28.
 - He cares for them whenever they pass through persecution – Luke 13:11f; Mark 13:11.

This revelation of God as Father to His children (Jesus’ followers) established them in a relationship of directness and intimacy:

- In the OT and in later Judaism – the teaching concerning God’s transcendence placed God at a distance from man’s world and circumstances.
- In the teaching of Jesus, God is revealed as Father-God with whom His people could enjoy an intimate relationship.

Example: Addressing God as “Father” in prayer:

- Jewish prayers: “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob! God most High, Creator of heaven and earth! Our Shield and the Shield of our Fathers.”
- Jesus’ teaching: “Our Father who is in heaven” or simply “Father/Abba” – upon the basis of this approach and revelation of the Person of God, the believer may come with simplicity and directness to his Father-God in prayer.

It is of special note, however, that Jesus nowhere uses “our Father” to mean “your Father” and “My Father” – see John 20:17. Jesus understood His Sonship to be of a different order to that of His disciples – His followers are “*adopted* sons” who come into this relationship through repentance, whereas Jesus is “the *natural* Child”, the “only” Son who uniquely manifests the Father’s character. God Himself declares Jesus to be the Son (Luke 3:22).

Jesus’ Sonship is not something He achieves through His mission but is the very basis of His mission. It is as the Son of God the Father that He proclaims the Kingdom of God. “*When he speaks of God as his Father, he is not only revealing a truth about God; he is also unveiling a mystery about himself (cf. Matt. 11:25-27).*” (NT Speaks: 101) Throughout most of His ministry, He disguises His Sonship by using the title “Son of Man”. The miracle of Jesus’ mission is that His followers become God’s sons.

Conclusion

Jesus’ teaching for His followers isn’t about morality but about life in God’s Kingdom. “*It is the way of the Kingdom, the way in which God’s will may be done on earth as it is done in heaven, the way in which the subjects of the Heavenly King may show their loyalty to him through obedience to his will.*” (TW Manson, quoted in NT Speaks: 102)

These teachings of Jesus were given to those who belonged to God’s Kingdom by faith in Jesus, God’s beloved Son, those who had become His children by adoption. It was not an ethical teaching to be imposed upon society. Apart from man’s experiencing a radical change in his nature and will, such teaching is meaningless and irrelevant.

Thus Jesus revealed to His disciples God’s will for their living while on earth – “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” The disciple cannot imagine that he can fulfil God’s will on earth as if he were already in heaven. However, his life is to be one of desiring and expressing God’s will being worked out on earth. Fulfilling God’s will on earth will have radical implications. For Jesus, this meant death (Mark 14:36). However, if the follower of Jesus obeys the will of God, even the suffering and the losses are light under the yoke of Jesus (Matt.11:28-30).

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