

# Jesus: The Master Communicator

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Dear fellow communicators of God's life-giving Word,

Jesus is the Master Communicator. It's the truth. None of us would dispute it. But all of us might ask: "Why bother? Why spend valuable conference time studying the communication strategies of Jesus, which is surely one of the lesser themes of the Bible?"

I'd like to offer a three-point answer. First, Jesus Christ is the Great Prophet Moses predicted (Deuteronomy 18:15,18), the Son by whom God has spoken to us in these last days (Hebrews 1:2). He is the only perfect preacher and teacher this world has or will ever know. While His communication strategies are not a prominent theme of the Bible, God's Word does shed some light on them. A study of Jesus' communication strategies can help us gain a deeper appreciation of His prophetic work. Secondly, Jesus continues His prophetic work through His believers on earth. We are included in this select and elect group. Like Jesus, we are communicators of God's Word to others. We are people of whom Jesus can say: "I have given them your word." We are people to whom He can declare: "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16). We have a personal interest in Gospel communication strategies.

Permit me to introduce the third part of my answer with a story. A pastor was at a mental health center, leading a service for the patients. In his sermon, he was trying to raise the issue of life purpose. He stated the question: "Why are we here? Why are we here?" very emphatically and then paused to give the group time for reflection. One of the patients rose and answered the pastor's question. He said: "Pastor, I don't know why you're here. But we're here because we're not all there." I'd like to suggest that when it comes to quality communication of the most important message of all, we're here (and we need to be here) because we're not all there. Some of us may be farther along than others, but none of us has finally arrived. All of us have things to learn from the Master about how better to communicate the precious Word entrusted to our care.

How are we going to approach this subject? We could do it a number of ways. We could do an exhaustive analysis of the Gospels to identify the techniques and strategies Jesus employed in His communication ministry. We could use one of the fine books written on this subject, such as Dr. Herman H. Horne's *Teaching Techniques Of Jesus* or Clifford A. Wilson's *Jesus The Master Teacher*, to guide us in our study. Either approach would be a good investment of our time. However, for our study today, I've settled on another strategy. We will focus our attention on only eight of the key principles or methods which made Jesus the effective communicator He was. We will analyze them and apply them to our own situation.

## 1. Jesus Was a Master Student of Life

One can only legitimately give what he has first received. It is true for us and it was true for Jesus. As we begin our look at some of the factors that made Jesus the Master of communication, we do well to consider first that Jesus was a Master Student of life. Luke's account of Jesus as a boy in the temple, the only account we have of Jesus from the time of His birth until the time He assumes His public ministry at age 30, gives us some valuable insights concerning Jesus the Student of life. Luke points out Jesus' personal and obedient relationship to God the Father, His zeal to learn, His ability to inquire and think incisively about significant matters of life, His growth in wisdom (i.e. comprehensive insight into the will and work of God). As an adult, we find Jesus thoroughly prepared for His task. He knows the Father and the Father's will intimately as evidenced in His use of Scripture and in His vibrant prayer life. He has a rich, spiritual world view, complete with a knowledge of and love for people, the world and the way life works. Jesus was able to communicate so well because He, first of all, had learned so well.

E. M. Bounds has said: "The man, the whole man, lies behind the sermon. Preaching is not the performance of an hour. It is the outflow of a life." This is a valuable lesson which Jesus teaches us. If we want to preach and teach the Gospel better, we need to pay careful attention to our study of life. We need to keep developing our personal relationship with God through a meaningful life of Scripture study and prayer and not let it grow weak through neglect. We need to keep cultivating our minds by taking time to read, study, discuss and think through the significant matters of life. We need to resist the tendency to let the burdens of life dull our concern for people and our zest and appreciation for life. Good communicators are good students of life.

Question: What suggestions would you offer to help us develop our mastery of life?

## **2. Jesus Faithfully Followed a Master Plan for His Ministry**

Jesus was a Master Strategist. He had a game-plan for His life which He followed to the letter. He articulated His mission as the promised Messiah in several ways: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Not only did Jesus have a game-plan for His life, He also had one for His ministry of communication. What was that master plan? John 17:6-8 and Luke 24:45-48 give us the insights we need to formulate an answer. In His High Priestly Prayer from John 17, Jesus says: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." In the last chapter of Luke we read: "Then he (Jesus) opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'" From these two references, we can define Jesus' master plan of communication in this way: Jesus' master plan of communication was to reveal Himself as the God-sent Savior in order to create believing witnesses who would share that revelation with others.

Jesus followed that master plan faithfully throughout His ministry. One example of His faithfulness to the plan occurs when the people of Capernaum try to keep him from leaving their city. Jesus responds by saying: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43).

From Jesus we can learn the importance of planning our communication and following through on our plans. It's been said that pastors and teachers tend to have a "high fog index" as they try to communicate without a clear purpose or objectives in mind. Time devoted to thinking through the ultimate purpose of our preaching and teaching and the objectives, goals and strategies which support that purpose is time well spent. Our task is too important to be haphazard about it. Jesus was a Master Strategist. We should be also.

Question: What words adequately express the master plan for your ministry of communication in your current calling?

## **3. Jesus Concentrated On Developing a Core Group of Reproducing Disciples**

One of the key elements of Jesus' master plan of communication was to develop a core group of reproducing disciples. We are using the word "disciple" here, not in the general sense of "a follower of Jesus," regardless of the level of commitment; but in the special sense of "a dedicated, loving, obedient and fruitful follower of Jesus." Jesus concentrated on cultivating men who would eagerly accept His teachings, adopt His lifestyle and join in His mission.

This is not to say that Jesus had little concern for the masses. Jesus was very concerned about the multitudes and spent much time with them. However, He gave priority to the development of twelve adult men. Jesus did this because He wanted to conduct a ministry of multiplication rather than a ministry of addition.

Jesus knew that the time of His physical ministry on earth was limited. If the Gospel were to spread throughout the world, workers had to be prepared to carry on what Jesus started. Jesus took the time to prepare workers. At the end of His three years of public ministry, the Twelve were ready to continue the communication ministry. The Book of Acts rehearses for us the wonderful ministry of multiplication the Spirit enabled them to have.

Many have recognized the importance of a ministry of multiplication. John Raleigh Mott, a great leader in the field of missions, said: "Greater is he that multiplies the workers than he who does the work." Dwight Moody maintained: "It is more important to get ten men to work than to do the work of ten men." Do we recognize the importance of developing reproducing disciples for Christ? Unfortunately, many churches don't put it very high on their list of priorities. Consider the way many denominations, congregations and communicators measure success. Most of the statistics given in reports tend to answer the question: "How many people did we add to the audience?" rather than "How well did we prepare people for their task?" A communicator who wants his/her ministry to have deep and lasting impact will give serious attention to the Savior's strategy of giving priority to the development of reproducing disciples.

An interesting sidelight to this topic is Jesus' concentration on developing adult men. Jesus certainly had a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of children. Mark's account of Jesus' blessing of the little children (Mark 10:13-16) illustrates this concern. But the focus of Jesus' ministry was on adults. The Evangelical Lutheran Church has historically placed a strong emphasis on the spiritual training of children. It's a good emphasis. God has used it to bring many blessings to us. I personally hope we never lose it. But I also hope we can give at least an equally as strong emphasis to the spiritual training of our adult members. Christian growth in the Word is a lifelong process, not a childhood program. Adults play a key role in the building of God's Kingdom. Adults are more able to perform vital ministry than children. Adults who are parents have far more influence over their children's spiritual development than a church staff member ever will have. Adults need to be spiritually prepared for Kingdom work by their pastors and teachers. Our Pacific Northwest District's record of having 21% of our communicant members in Bible class looks good compared to the WELS average of 9%, but it's not what it could be. We and the churches we serve might well consider investing at least as much manpower and money into the training of our adult members as we invest in our children. The Master did say: "Feed my lambs." But He said: "Feed my sheep" twice.

Question: What can we do to make our ministry of communication one which better prepares people for reproducing discipleship?

#### **4. Jesus Adapted His Communication to People's Nature and Situation**

Jesus specialized in custom-made communication. He carefully and sensitively crafted His communication to accommodate the nature and life situation of the people with whom He talked. Jesus knew people. John tells us: "Jesus...knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man." Jesus knew the nature of people, their inside. He also knew their life situation, their outside, the external factors and forces which shaped them. He used this knowledge of people to communicate effectively with them.

Jesus began His communication where people were and not where He assumed they ought to be. He recognized and respected such factors as their world view, culture, previous knowledge and experiences and attention span. He respected each person as a unique individual. He talked the people's language, using common terms (the kingdom of heaven; etc.), common issues (the Messiah, ex.) and common images (bread, water, etc.) to communicate God's Good News. Jesus was an incarnate example of St. Paul's principle of "becoming all things to all men."

Are we consciously following the Master in this matter? One of the risks religious professionals run is that of getting out of touch with the common man. Dr. R.W. Luxton shared this insight in an article in the *British Medical Journal* in 1957: "How much of what is customary to the man in the pulpit is gibberish to the man in the pew? I was told of a patient in the chapel of a mental hospital who, after listening for a time to the Chaplain, was heard to remark, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.'" How's that for a twist? If we want our communication to be effective, we must pay attention, not only to our message, but also to those whom we intend to receive our message.

This is hard work. John Stott, Rector of All Souls Church in London, a noted speaker and author, says: "It is comparatively easy to be faithful if we do not care about being contemporary, and easy also to be contemporary if we do not bother to be faithful. It is the search for a combination of truth and relevance which is exacting. Yet nothing else can save us from an insensitive loyalty to formulae and shibboleths on the one hand, and from a treasonable disloyalty to the revelation of God on the other."

Sharers of the Good News must also be students of people. Keeping in touch with the external factors that affect people - their past experiences, their life pressures and pleasures, cultural mores, etc.; and increasing our understanding of the inner workings of human nature will aid us in our task of bringing the Gospel to people in a relevant manner.

Question: Suggest some ways we can increase our sensitivity to the nature and life situation of the people to whom we communicate?

## **5. Jesus Communicated in an Attractive, Interesting Manner**

Jesus was an appealing communicator. Mark tells us: "The large crowd listened to him with delight" (Mark 12:37b). The Gospels give us several instances of large crowds who followed Jesus into remote areas in order to hear Him. We read of Zaccheus climbing a tree and a paralyzed man going through a roof because of the throngs of people attracted to the Master.

What was the key to His appeal? Surely, much of His popularity depended on the content of His messages. Jesus spoke about the things in life that really mattered - about God and how to know Him, about eternal life, about absolute truth, about human wholeness (peace), about spiritual freedom, etc. But I believe we can safely say that Jesus' manner of communicating had something to do with His appeal. Jesus was an interesting communicator. He was expert in presenting Gospel truth in an attractive way. His gripping stories (parables), such as The Good Samaritan or The Prodigal Son; His incisive questions, such as "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26a) or "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Luke 12:25); His use of visual aids, such as lilies, sheep and winebottles; and His use of humor as in the example of the man with the beam in his eye wanting to remove the splinter from the eye of another were part of Jesus' refreshing communication style.

We can learn from the Master the importance of making our communication as attractive and interesting as possible. We have heard the following principle often: "While our manner of presentation cannot make the Word of God more powerful than it already is, it can detract from the effectiveness of the communication." The Word we proclaim is a divine Word, but it is a Word which comes to us through human channels of communication. The manner in which we present the Gospel does matter. If we are dull and boring, our people will be head-bobbing and wool-gathering, and the message will not get through. We must have the interest and attention of our hearers. Salvation does not occur by osmosis, nor does sanctification, for that matter.

The Good News of Jesus is such a precious message, it deserves the best we have to give so it comes across in fresh, appealing ways. Let us work hard to master the techniques that will gain and keep people's interest. Let us seek ways to reach both the affective (emotional) domain and the cognitive (intellectual) domain in our hearers. Let us learn to make better use of stories and other literary forms, of humor, of questions, of visual and audio-visual aids. Let's do it so we offer people lessons and sermons which they cannot help but listen to, so they hear God's Word with delight.

Question: Suggest five things we can do to make our communication of the Gospel more attractive and interesting?

## **6. Jesus Communicated in an Authoritative, Powerful Manner**

Jesus was a powerful communicator. Matthew records: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:28-29). John affirms Jesus' power in proclaiming when he tells of the Jewish leaders' unsuccessful arrest attempt: "Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why didn't you bring him in?' 'No one ever spoke the way this man does.' the guards declared" (John 7:45-46).

What made Jesus' teaching so powerful? A big reason was the fact that Jesus was declaring the authoritative, powerful Word of God. There were other reasons. One was Jesus' preparedness. He knew His message thoroughly. He was always in control of the communication, even when that communication was a quick response to an issue which surfaced spontaneously. A second supplementary reason was Jesus' unshakable belief in His message. He was fully convinced that God's "word is truth" (John 17:17b) and that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35b). He held firmly to that Word at all times - when opposed, when challenged, when disbelieved, when enduring the pains of hell.

These insights from the Master's life are great encouragements for us. Boldness and power in communication are greatly enhanced by our preparedness. If we take the time to master our message, we will find we are able to speak with confidence and authority. Hand in hand with our knowledge of our message, should go a strong personal belief in it. God can and will grant us the unshakable conviction that His Word is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16b) and "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12b). May we ask Him for that conviction regularly. The well-known German preacher, Helmut Thielicke, asserts that one thing the people of this world long for are "credible spokesmen," people who know, who believe and who live their message. Jesus was such a credible spokesman. He wants us to be also.

Question: What advice would you give to the person who wants to add more power to his/her communication of God's Word?

## **7. Jesus Prepared People to Live out their Faith in Life**

Jesus' communication was life-related. One of His great concerns was that people have a functional faith, a faith that worked by love, a faith which found expression in life. Jesus was not content to influence just the hearts of men. He desired to influence their mouths and hands and feet as well. Jesus gave very practical, life-related instruction. He not only taught His disciples what faith was, He put them on a boat, sent a storm and gave them a chance to exercise it. He not only developed compassion for lost people, He gave His followers experience in winning the lost as He sent out groups of 70 and 12.

How well do we prepare people to translate their faith into life? One pastor submits that we often fail our people in this critical area. He indicates that we seldom give our people meaningful homework and helps on how to complete it. He suggests that we give special conscious attention to this matter by having us ask two key questions as we prepare each lesson or sermon: 1) What do I want my people to be and/or do as a result of this message? and 2) How can my people be and/or do what I have set up for them to be and/or do? The connection between faith and life is a vital one. We do well to spend quality preparation time to help our people make it.

Question: What other suggestions would you give so we can better enable people to live out their faith in life?

## **8. Jesus Stimulated People to Personally Assimilate His Communication**

Jesus was a stimulating communicator. He communicated to transform people's lives, not merely to transfer information to their heads. Jesus worked to get people actively participating in the learning process. He challenged them to think through the implications of His teachings and personally come to grips with the vital truths He shared. After waking and calming the storm, Jesus asked the panic-stricken disciples: "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25)

In an effort to clarify His disciples' understanding of Him, Jesus asked: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (Luke 9:20) While addressing would-be followers, the Master challenged them to consider the cost: "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27,33). To the ruler whose riches got between him and God, Jesus commanded: "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22).

Jesus was always stimulating people to personally assimilate His communication. Are we doing it in our classrooms and churches? An article which appeared in Christianity Today several years ago, dropped a most disturbing verbal gauntlet. The writer said: "In the case of most churches in America, you can easily unscrew your head before you enter, leave it outside the door and then pick it up again when the service is over because you won't need it inside the church." Portraying worship and the reception of Gospel communication as a mindless activity is a very sharp accusation. We might easily dismiss the criticism as invalid, but I don't know if we should. Perhaps we should take it to heart and ask ourselves some important questions. Could it be that we, unwittingly, make it too easy and too comfortable for our people? Could it be that in our efforts to make God's Word simple and clear, we make it simplistic and unprovocative? Could it be that we are doing too much spoon-feeding of spiritual truth and not enough challenging to get people to actively and independently think through the implications of that truth for their lives? An honest coming to grips with questions like these may be very helpful to us as we strive to be stimulating communicators.

Question: How can we better stimulate people to personally assimilate our communication?

### **A Closing Thought**

While addressing a group of Australian pastors, John Stott shared this insight on Gospel communication: "Good preaching and teaching is not basically a matter of mastering certain techniques. It is, above all, a matter of being mastered by the Master and His convictions." Dear fellow communicators of the Word, I hope this paper has been and will continue to be of help to you. I hope that you will take the time to think through and master certain techniques to enhance your ability to communicate the Word. But, above all, that you will continue to devote your whole life to being mastered by the Master and His convictions. For then, you will not only be good preachers and teachers, but also faithful followers of Him that died that we might live.