

Jesus as Typical first-century Teacher with Disciples:

A key to understanding Jesus' teaching and activities is knowing details about his role as a first-century itinerant teacher/rabbi/sage:

- In the first century there were hundreds, perhaps well over a thousand, local teachers with disciples. They were well educated in the Hebrew Scriptures and the written and oral Torah. They were held in high esteem and were called “master”, “teacher”, and sometimes “rabbi.” The term “rabbi” literally meant “my master” and referred to a wise teacher or sage, but did not hold the same role and authority as rabbis were given after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
- A common profile of a first-century sage or rabbi includes:
 - Traveled from place to place, depending on local hospitality
 - The venues for teaching were homes (Luke 10:38-42; Mary and Martha), outdoors (Mark 2:13-14; by the lake at Capernaum & Luke 6:12-26; a mountain and level plain), public sites within or near villages (Luke 5:1-11; on the shore of Lake Gennesaret & Matthew 9:1-8; in public at Capernaum), synagogues (Matthew 4:23), and the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 20:1-8). A sage and his disciples would stay for a day, a week, or sometimes a month in one place.
 - The usual posture for teaching was sitting (Matthew 5:1 & 26:55; Luke 5:3)
 - Each venue (a boat, field, vineyard, lake, path, or home) provided visible and common examples to use in teaching, especially parables.
 - An inner group of disciples traveled with their master/sage/rabbi and shared meals and a common life; some “followers” traveled temporarily and then returned home. In Jesus culture a teacher created a “faction” to promote a specific purpose for a specific period of time (i.e. for Jesus to promote the kingdom of God)
 - The purpose of becoming a “follower” was to learn a specific way of life; the teaching was not limited to “knowledge” or “wisdom”; the teaching was primarily being close to and sharing the life of the master/sage; teaching was by example and learning was by experience.
 - Jesus' followers included women and children (a scandalous innovation). Some women were single (Mary Magdalene) others were most likely wives of male disciples.
 - Methods of teaching included:
 - Asking and answering questions: (Luke 2:46; Jesus in Temple & Luke 22:67-68)
 - Challenge and response : one way of seeking truth (what God desires) was to question a behavior or raise a hypothetical situation and demand a response (Luke 6:1-11 describes two incidents where Jesus eating and healing on the Sabbath is questioned by some Pharisees and experts on the Torah, i.e. scribes)
 - Parables: there were thousands of parables told by sages in Jesus culture; Jesus uses parables, sometimes on the spur of the moment, to challenge an existing situation, describe an inner meaning, to make people think

“beyond the box of the status quo”, to make people see themselves more clearly, etc. Parables were never meant to be “parsed”, as so often happens in modern sermons and bible studies. Parables almost always had only one point to either demonstrate or have the hearers discover by reflection. Hyperbole is often used by Jesus to get attention as well as show the life/death implications of what he is saying.

- Jesus’ demanded total commitment from his disciples; it was not a “part-time” relationship: (the young lawyer who could not give up his wealth; “you must ‘hate’ your family (i.e. not give them priority) if you follow me...”; “let the dead bury the dead”; “take up your cross and follow me...”; “the person who is willing to lose one’s life is the person who will find life...”. (Rowan Williams recently wrote: “There is all the difference in the world between having a ‘spiritual life’ and walking in the way of Jesus.”)
- Rabbis/sages collected lots of dust! Traveling in first-century Palestine was along dusty roads; feet got sweaty and caked with dust. This is why the first act of hospitality was to wash someone’s feet. At the same time “dust” was a rich metaphor. A rabbinic saying from the century before Jesus exhorts: “Let your home be a meeting house for the sages, and cover yourself with the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.” (M. Avot 1:4) This is why when Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha, Mary is described as “sitting at Jesus’ feet.”

The unique dimension of Jesus’ parables:

- Rabbis and story-tellers in Jesus’s culture used parables to illustrate or clarify a point in their teaching. Since most people in this culture were illiterate, stories were essential and used familiar images and details from the daily life of the hearers/students.
- *Jesus did not use parables in this way*, although he did use images, situations, and details from daily life. Jesus’ parables did not serve as explanations of a teaching that was independent of the parable. His parables **were the teaching, itself**.
- Jesus began with a challenge (you have heard it said, but I say to you...), a question (often a disturbing question), a description of a situation (a farmer planted seed), a contrast (small mustard seed grows into a large shrub), etc.
- Jesus’ parables challenge hearers to be involved in the parable; they are not spectators: Jesus is saying “this is about you!” (“{He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”)
- Jesus is telling his hearers that “What I have to say is about YOU.”
- Jesus’ parables are for everyone, not an elite group.

“His message was not for the few, but for all. The way of life he taught was one that could be followed by everyone. He made no distinctions between rich and poor, learned and unlearned, class and station in life. The masses, like sheep without a shepherd appealed to his compassion, and without waiting for them to come to him, he went into the midst of them”

(James Franklin Bethune-Baker, *Early Traditions About Jesus*. Seabury Press, 1956, 45.)

- Jesus used his parables to challenge his hearers to follow him and become part of the reign of God in their society.