



RESEARCH

Jesus' Use of Object Lessons: Possible Considerations for Religious Communication

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The New Testament considered Jesus an experienced communicator with diverse methods. Though they regard him for his intellect, his pedagogy is more complex than we realize. This paper will argue that Jesus uses object lessons as a significant method for adult religious education. Through nature, animals, food, and people, Jesus uses physical beings to articulate the Bible's deepest concepts. The gospel writers show how Jesus' embodied teaching is sensitive to both the content and context before him. Jesus used object lessons to spark wonder, initiate action, express care, and recognize human agency. This paper will discuss three passages in Mark, Luke, and John where Jesus explicitly uses an object to teach spiritual concepts. I will incorporate the work of Joel Marcus, Michael J. Gorman, Rudolf Schnackenburg, Jeff Hubbard, and Jean Piaget to propose that Jesus' embodied teaching creates a shared experience between him and his audience.

1. Introduction

The Gospels present Jesus as an experienced communicator with a variety of methods. For instance, he used objects to explain complex concepts. Using physical materials to explain the spiritual added an embodied element to Jesus' teaching. The writers of Luke, John, and Mark articulate Jesus' use of object lessons to create connection. This article will discuss Jesus' use of object lessons in Luke 5:1–11, John 4:7–39, and Mark 14:22–26.¹

This paper has three main sections. The first section will explain what an object lesson is and how the brain responds to this practice. Object lessons are a significant teaching practice for both children and adult learners. Second, I will present three Gospel passages where Jesus uses object-based teaching. Through these case studies, I will consider two key questions: What words did Jesus use when executing an object lesson? How did the object function in relation to his words? The third and final section will present Jesus' spiritual messages as considerations for religious education. Collectively, these sections will show how Jesus used embodied language to create interpersonal connection.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB 2020).

2. Tangible Theory: Learning Psychology of Object Lessons

An object lesson is a teaching style that incorporates a physical visual aid to teach a point. Simply put, an object lesson has two ingredients: an object and a message. The item must be real and tangible. In this sense, anything inanimate or animate, including plants, animals, or persons, can qualify as an object. For a lesson to become an object lesson, the presenter must teach a concept explicitly from that item. The object makes an abstract idea more concrete by attaching the concept to something physically present (Sengupta 2003, 97). In other words, the characteristics of the visual aid can help the listener understand the abstraction. In *Creating Visual Explanations Improves Learning*, Eliza Bobek and Barbara Tversky argue that integrating language with a visual aid can increase understanding of both the visual aid and the concept (Bobek and Tversky 2016, 27). They write:

Visualizations are thus readily able to depict the parts and configurations of systems; presenting the same content via language may be more difficult. Although words can describe spatial properties, because the correspondences of meaning to language are purely symbolic, comprehension and construction of mental representations from descriptions is far more effortful and error-prone. (Bobek and Tversky 2016, 27)

Visual aids not only engage multiple parts of the brain but also help us perceive a concept that words alone could not teach. Words provide a baseline for explaining a concept, but on their own, they leave room for ambiguity and do not reinforce the idea. Bobek and Tversky's article suggests that a visual aid is a more effective teaching tool than words alone, because it is paired with verbal language. The object lesson is not confined to the visual aid; its delivery can provide a holistic understanding of how the concept functions. Further, if the teacher chooses an object that is both relevant and common, the learner can relate the message's language to the object's qualities. The learner then has preliminary knowledge of the concept because they know the object.

In *Mental Imagery in the Child*, Jean Piaget argues that children learn primarily through physical experience, as they discover the world through their senses (Piaget 1971, xvi). Expanding this, he believed that all ages are accustomed to object-style teaching, as all people were once children (Piaget and Inhelder 1969, 3). As children develop into adolescents and adults, their capacity for abstract thinking only grows. Because each stage builds upon the last, connecting an abstraction to a depiction may actually deepen the embedded knowledge.

David Kolb connects Piaget's stages of development to interactive learning. In *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, he agrees with Piaget's premise that experience is what forms knowledge. Kolb elaborates:

The growing child's system of knowing changes qualitatively in successively identifiable stages, moving from an enactive stage, where knowledge is represented in concrete actions and is not separable from the experiences that spawn it, to an ikonik stage, where knowledge is represented in images that have an increasingly autonomous status from the experiences they represent, to stages of concrete and formal operations, where knowledge is represented in symbolic terms, symbols capable of being manipulated internally with complete independence from experiential reality. (Kolb 2014, 12)

Intelligence is not solely dependent upon one's brain development. Rather, learning develops as an individual actively engages with their environment. Initially, each person understands concepts through embodied action. In *The Body in Action: Predictive Processing and the Embodiment Thesis*, Michael D. Kirchhoff (2018, 243) articulates that embodied action is the primary function of cognition. After engaging the senses, experiences become memories, and memories become knowledge. Once a tangible experience becomes a memory, the learner can then receive new knowledge in an abstract form. While Piaget argues that childhood spurs abstract thinking, Kirchhoff (2018, 244) articulates how personal experience should bolster all new knowledge. Kirchhoff, Bobek, Tversky, Piaget, and Kolb all argue for the benefits of object lessons. Similarly, the writers of Luke, John, and Mark depict Jesus' own praxis of participatory learning. The next section discusses three passages where Jesus teaches in an embodied way.

3. Incarnational Instruction: Jesus' Integration of the Physical and Spiritual

The first case study comes from Luke 5:1–11. Seeing Simon, James, and John washing their nets, Jesus joins them in the boat. He asks the men to row farther out and let down the nets. When pulling the nets out, they are astonished at their significant catch. Jesus uses the newfound fish to make his point: “Do not fear; from now on you will be catching people” (5:10).

This narrative describes Jesus as teaching a crowd before teaching the disciples (Talbert 2002, 59). Inviting Simon, James, and John to pursue people welcomes them into his work and expands his current audience. Joel Green notes how Jesus' teaching does not pause, but evolves through his miracle: “Success in fishing, under Jesus' authority, is a prophetic symbol for the mission in which Peter and the others will participate, while Jesus himself in his word and miraculous deed, is himself engaged in catching” (Green 2021, 233). Jesus' metaphor is less about equating fish with people and more about relating catching to engaging with others. He demonstrated what he meant by catching people through engaging the crowd. Speaking to the

crowd was one way he engaged others, while participating with the fishermen was another. After exhibiting his own commitment to calling followers, Jesus used fish to call the disciples to do the same.

However, before bringing the disciples into his work, Jesus partners with them in theirs. Aiding the sailors in their fishing validated the importance of both sustenance and work. Luke 5 depicts Jesus as a helper, then one in need of help. Paula Owens Parker articulates how mutual hospitality served as a prerequisite for Jesus' teaching. She writes, "Jesus' request to use Simon Peter's boat as a pulpit and Simon Peter's response were an expression of hospitality, the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend, and offered an opportunity to develop a relationship" (Parker 2020, 68). The rich hospitality culture already present within the narrative established a reciprocal relationship between Jesus and Simon upon their meeting. Then, this same reciprocity served as a vessel for Jesus' teaching.

While the disciples invite Jesus onto their boat, he connects their surroundings to his message. Using their context for his illustration positions the disciples not as employees but as partners in ministry. Jesus tells the disciples they will "be catching people," reframing their vocation. Rudolf Bultmann (1972, 28) suggests that Jesus invented this phrasing specifically in this scene.² Because of this, there is little historical context on the saying itself. However, its uniqueness depicts Jesus creating a new phrase (Wassell and Llewelyn 2014, 628). In Luke 5:11, the three men respond to the unique message by becoming Jesus' disciples (Laverdiere 1980, 77).

The setting of Luke 5 depicts Jesus as an experienced communicator before addressing Simon, James, and John. The listening crowd already places Jesus in a position of authority (5:1). The sailors exhibit knowledge of that authority without having personally known him (5:5). Their awareness becomes a catalyst for Jesus' message. The narrator then uses the crowd's listening to parallel the disciples' listening (5:1, 5:5). Just as Jesus models the work he asks of the sailors, the crowd's listening parallels the disciples' own response.

The second case study comes from John 4:7–39. Here, a Samaritan woman draws water at a well when Jesus also arrives. Appearing very thirsty, Jesus asks her for a drink. Aware of their cultural animosity, the woman asks why Jesus is speaking to her. Hanna-Maria Mehring (2024, 7) suggests the comment is an attempt to hold Jesus accountable to Jewish law. Her initial integrity

² In the parallel passages, Mark 1:17 and Matthew 4:19, Jesus calls them "fishers of people," a slightly different wording with the same idea behind it.

immediately establishes a level of equality between them. Instead of placing Jesus in a position of power, the Johannine narrative puts them on even ground.

In these first few moments, Jesus reframes Jewish-Samaritan relations in two ways—by speaking to a Samaritan, and to a woman. Marianne Meye Thompson (2015, 99) takes Jesus' cross-cultural communication one step further by emphasizing his willingness to drink from the same vessel as the woman. Samaritan women were regarded as menstruants from birth. Because of this, many considered their bodies and the items they touched as unclean (Daube 1950, 140). However, Jesus asks to share the jar of water. His nonchalance causes the woman to focus on his words and actions (Schnackenburg 1982, 428).

The Samaritan woman continues asking Jesus questions. Her curiosity indicates both her engagement and willingness to converse. His answer uses the water in an object lesson. In verse 10, Jesus says, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). Similar to Luke 5, Jesus uses his surroundings to teach a lesson. He takes the water as an example. However, he does not immediately explain his message. Instead, he describes the water's qualities before defining what it represents. Unlike the well water, the living water is satisfying and life-giving (4:14). Jesus contrasts the temporary refreshment of the well water with the everlasting water to which he is referring (De Boer 2025, 532). Further, the living water does not just satisfy the drinker's thirst. It becomes "in him a fountain" (4:14). The living water initiates an internal change within those who drink it.

Misunderstanding that Jesus is speaking symbolically, the woman asks where she can obtain this everlasting water (4:15). Instead of immediately clarifying, Jesus shifts the conversation to discuss salvation, God, himself, and the Holy Spirit (4:23–24). Though he never explicitly explains what the living water is, the subject change alludes to God and Spirit relating to this object. In addition, the narrator contrasts Jesus as the receiver of physical water with Jesus as the giver of living water (De Boer 2025, 524). The woman, having something to offer Jesus, mirrors the illustration of Jesus' own gift. Jesus' focus on God, Spirit, and himself emphasizes him as both the giver and the gift to which he is referring.

After Jesus finishes speaking, the woman says she is looking for the "Messiah" (4:25). Her mention of a savior after Jesus spoke of salvation indicates her understanding (Smith 1999, 113). Jesus confirms her comprehension by identifying as the one for whom she is looking (4:26). The woman again demonstrates understanding by proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ (4:29). Though she did not immediately grasp the water's meaning, the narrator

depicts Jesus' subject change as the point where the lesson clicks. After proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the woman goes back to town, sharing what she heard.

Unlike Luke 5, the writer of John depicts Jesus' symbolic teaching as synonymous with the teacher himself. Jesus associates himself with living water while also identifying as both the giver and the content of said water. In other words, the author of John depicts Jesus as both the communicator and the topic of his own communication. Further, the narrator depicts the conversation to parallel the content. Ernst Haenchen (1984, 221) notes how the woman's engagement reinforces the meaning of the message: "Whoever is led to God by Jesus through his Spirit becomes himself a spring, a bearer of salvation for others. This is in fact fulfilled by the Samaritan woman: having come to faith herself, she now leads the Samaritans to faith." The woman, whom the narrator originally depicts as unclean, reclaims agency within the story. As one who once held an impure jar, she herself becomes the vessel for Jesus' message. While the woman's identity does not change, her status develops. The transformation of the woman's status parallels the passage's theme of personal change.

In both Luke 5 and John 4, the listener has a unique level of trust toward Jesus. Both authors describe Jesus' conversation partners as strangers, but they continue to engage in discussion. Further, neither narrator depicts Jesus building connections before teaching a message. In Luke 5, Jesus does not ask Simon, James, or John anything about themselves before asking them to follow. In John 4, Jesus does not talk to the woman about herself until halfway through his message (4:16). The authors of Luke and John do not articulate a relationship as a prerequisite for communicating a concept. Rather, it was attention that Jesus sought before articulating something.

The third case study comes from Mark 14:22–26. Here, Jesus eats the Passover dinner with his disciples. Rather than following the Jewish custom of beginning the meal with a blessing, he waits until they are well into eating to bless the food. The fact that Jesus blesses the food while they are eating already indicates this is not a normal meal. Additionally, Jesus blesses the bread and wine individually. The narrator shows Jesus giving special attention to both elements, cuing the reader that the bread and wine mean something more.

During the meal, Jesus takes bread, saying, "Take *it*; this is my body" (14:22), drawing their attention. According to the narrative, Jesus also distributes the bread among them. Further, he does not just stop at the bread but incorporates a second element. He takes wine, but he asks the disciples to drink before interpreting it. The disciples listen and drink from the cup. Then he says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many" (14:24). Jesus calls attention to the wine the same way he did with the bread. As Jesus associates the bread with his body, he relates the

wine to his blood. While he does not elaborate on the body, the blood is being “poured out for many.” The narrator’s use of “poured out” visually represents the spilling of blood. While the wine is an elaboration of the bread, it also serves as a juxtaposition. Although the narrative depicts the bread as something other than itself, the bread does not *do* anything. The bread, though representing flesh, remains inanimate. The wine represents blood in both existence and action. Jesus almost personifies the wine by describing its covenantal powers and illustrating the pouring of his own blood. The phrase “is being poured” comes from the word ἐκχυννόμενον, which is a present passive participle (Bauer 2010, 302). The syntax describes Jesus’ bloodshed as a current (or ongoing) event. Here, Jesus describes his suffering as not just imminent, but already in effect.

N. T. Wright (1996, 556) articulates Jesus’ words as a precursor to understanding the symbolism of the bread and wine. During Passover, it was customary to introduce the objects on the table and describe each one. The elements on the table typically reflected back on the Israelite enslavement and looked forward to a coming Messiah. David Carmichael (1991, 46) argued that the messianic themes of the Passover correlated to a messianic message within the bread. Deborah Carmichael (1991, 53) expands this by noting how the bread metaphorically unites the Israelites and the Messiah. Therefore, the uniqueness of Jesus’ interpretation is not in connecting the bread to a Messiah, but in associating himself with the metaphor. He then used the symbolism of the bread to explain the wine.

After introducing the wine, he says, “Truly I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again, until that day when I drink it, new, in the kingdom of God” (14:25). This implies a level of transaction. Jesus releases his right to drink the wine and offers the cup to his disciples. This transaction is also a promise. Jesus promises not to partake in the vine until it is new. Though this promise has transactional language, Jesus does not ask for anything. Jesus himself abstains so the disciples may partake. The end of his statement indicates this is about more than bread and wine. His mention of God’s kingdom suggests that the wine represents more. This increases the value of Jesus’ gift. The disciples, without doing anything, have been offered something cosmic. Unlike the other case studies, Jesus uses two physical elements to illustrate something physical. He uses the bread and wine to speak about himself—his bodily sacrifice on the cross (Hubbard 2023, 287). In this passage, the spiritual element is less understood through the objects themselves than through the method of Jesus’ message.

Joel Marcus (2009, 964) notes that Jesus’ teaching of hope is not just in the elements, but also in the distribution: “The redemptive note is integrally connected to the bread symbolism—Jesus links his body with bread, which is consumed and hence destroyed (an allusion to his approaching death) but which also nourishes those who eat it.” Similarly, what was initially

metaphorical blood—belonging to Jesus—changes to represent his literal bloodshed. Here, Jesus uses what once were abstract symbols to speak plainly. In this instance, his words clarify the objects before him.

In addition, Michael Biggerstaff notes how the phrase “blood of my covenant” may clarify an abstraction in the Old Testament. He believes it to be a reference to Exod 24:8 (Biggerstaff 2009, 42). After returning with the Ten Commandments, Moses marks everyone with a sprinkling of blood, saying, “Behold, the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with these words” (Exod 24:8). By referencing this statement, the Markan narrative is doing two things. First, it connects Jesus’ blood to the fulfillment of the law Moses brought (Colvin 2019, 81). Second, this narrative correlates the historical Jesus with the “Lord” in the Old Testament. However, the Markan “blood of the covenant” contrasts the Exodus narrative in one key way. While Exodus considers the Jews as primary recipients, the Markan covenant includes more than just one group. Mark 14:24 concludes by saying that Jesus’ blood “is being poured out for many.” The ambiguity of this group suggests that Jesus’ death may have a positive effect on God’s relationship with all humanity (Jarvis and Johnson 2014, 463). After hearing this message, the disciples follow Jesus to the Mount of Olives.

While the Markan Jesus associates bread with its previous history, the wine reinforces the present. Both Mark 14 and John 4 use elements of nourishment to illustrate gifts from God. In both passages, Jesus speaks of himself as a gift. In John 4, Jesus also receives when the woman pours him water. Mark 14 expresses Jesus primarily as a giver, as he offers two objects while receiving nothing. This positions the blood covenant not, in fact, as a transaction, but as an inheritance. While John 4 focuses on living water as a catalyst for personal growth, Mark 14 uses bread and wine to illustrate a relational change between God and the world. These case studies offer several insights into the functionality and versatility of object lessons.

4. Conclusion

These case studies offer two key considerations. First, object lessons can function independently or with other pedagogy, like demonstrations (Mark 14:22–26; Luke 5:1–11) and activities (John 4:7–39). Adding a material item to a verbal message broadens the range of concepts one can glean. The more senses a speaker integrates, the more learning outcomes there are. Jesus’ use of multiple pedagogical practices suggests that increased engagement can lead to increased understanding. Second, object lessons create a shared experience. The Gospel writers depict Jesus as both a spiritual figure and a participant within the story (Kirk 2016, 576). Through each case study, every listener interacted with the objects themselves. Jesus participated in the same

interaction. In these narratives, relationship was not a prerequisite for Jesus' teaching. Rather, the shared experience Jesus had with the listener paved the way for greater learning.

Jesus' unique spiritual messages inspire religious education today. The historical Jesus acknowledged his humanity by participating in shared experience, while still communicating himself as a spiritual figure. While religion concerns itself with immaterial concepts, humans still exist within a physical world. Further, all organized religion starts with social interaction. Therefore, religious pedagogy must parallel this phenomenon. Object-based teaching is one way classrooms may simultaneously experience an event and make sense of greater mysteries. In *The Grace of Playing*, Courtney Goto formulates how engagement can bolster religious concepts. She writes, "Because religious education in its many forms is not simply cognitive but also affective and sensual, a broader understanding of aesthetics as bodily experience is helpful though incomplete without a theological nuancing" (Goto 2016, 20). By integrating embodied learning, religious institutions acknowledge what one can observe, while also considering what one cannot. Similarly, connecting effective theological language to an object can complete the learning experience. As religious educators create human connection, the learner's mind transforms..

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