

10. Jesus Used the Physical to Explain the Spiritual

Often, one of the major questions of developing leaders is, “How do I make the Gospel clear as I explain it to a person who is not a Christian?” Today, we will focus on that topic as we share how Christ used the physical to explain the spiritual. Two of the illustrations we will see are events that happened near the beginning of the public ministry of Christ and close to the end of that public ministry.

Near the start of His public ministry, Christ had the opportunity to talk to Nicodemus. As they talked, Christ used physical birth to explain spiritual birth. In John 3:3, we read, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Here, we see that Christ introduced the subject of spiritual birth. The answer of Nicodemus shows that he had no understanding of spiritual birth, but could only think of a second physical birth. John 3:4 says, “Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?’”

Jesus answered by sharing that there is both a physical birth and also a spiritual birth. John 3:6-7 says, “‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again.’” Then, Christ went on to explain to Nicodemus how he could experience a spiritual birth. By the time Jesus and Nicodemus had finished the discussion, Nicodemus knew the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth. He also knew that the way to experience spiritual birth was by believing in Christ and placing his trust in the fact that Christ died to pay the penalty for his sin so that he could be forgiven.

Near the end of His ministry, Christ used physical death to explain the meaning of spiritual death. This happened when Christ went to Bethany where Lazarus had experienced physical death four days earlier. His sister, Martha, believed in the future resurrection. When Christ told Martha that her brother would rise again, she said that she knew he would rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus responded, in John 11:25-26, “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” Her answer shows that her understanding was not clear.

This lack of understanding is clearly revealed a few verses later. John 11:39 says, “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, ‘Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.’” Then, in John 11:43-44, we read, “Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’” In this case, Jesus showed that physical life was restored as soon as He spoke the word. In the same way, a spiritual life begins at the moment a person places his or her trust in Christ. As John 11:25-26, in the previous paragraph says, those who believe will never die. They immediately receive spiritual life, and it will last forever.

In addition to using physical life to explain spiritual life, Christ also used many physical things to explain spiritual things. In Mark 4:1-20, Christ used four kinds of ground that had seed sown in

them to show the condition of men's hearts. There are four kinds of responses people make to the message of the Gospel. Some people hear the Word and immediately forget it. Some people hear the Word and get all excited about what they've heard, but quickly get sidetracked by their own problems. Some people hear the Word, but are so focused on their problems, or their desire for riches, that those things sidetrack them. The people whose hearts are like the good ground hear the Word, accept what they hear, and the Word brings forth fruit in their lives because they respond and place their trust in Christ.

A few verses later, Christ gave a second parable to explain how the Word of God works in the hearts of those who are like the good ground. In the previous parable, the focus was on the hearts of those who heard the Word of God. In this second parable, the focus is on how the Word of God works in the hearts of those whose hearts are like the good ground.

Mark 4:26-29 says, "And He said, 'The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.'" This time, Christ used the seed to explain how the Word of God works in the lives of those who are not Christians to draw them to Christ. We see that there is usually a period of time from the time the seed is first planted until the time the seed produces a harvest. As they continue to share the Word with individuals who are not yet Christians, developing leaders need to recognize that the Lord is working in their hearts. It will usually take time, but one day the harvest will come.

Of course, we also have many other times where Christ used something physical to explain about spiritual life. The following are just a few examples from the book of John:

- word – the Word became flesh – John 1
- lamb – the Lamb of God – John 1
- water – living water – John 4 and John 7:37-39
- bread – bread of life – John 6
- light – light of the world – John 8
- physical sight – spiritual sight – John 9
- door – Christ is the door – John 10
- shepherd – Christ is the Good Shepherd – John 10

As we look at the things Christ used to explain spiritual life, we see that they were all things that the people who were listening understood. Most of the examples used in the book of John can be easily explained in almost every culture. That means we can help developing leaders learn to use common things that everyone understands to explain about spiritual life, because these things are clearly understood in the culture in which they are sharing the Gospel. Every culture uses words, water, bread, light, physical sight, and doors in daily life. Every culture experiences physical birth and physical death.

In addition to things people see and use, Christ also used things that people feel to help them understand about spiritual life. John was in the boat when the disciples experienced fear in the storm. It is not a surprise that John would later speak of the fact that perfect love casts out fear. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18) John knew how the love of Christ changed both his physical fear and his spiritual fear.

Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that the fear that all people without Christ have is the fear of death. Those verses say, “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” This is a fear that everyone understands because it is the thing Satan uses to hold each person as a prisoner.

One of the things we see is that Christ used physical things that everyone understood to make clear spiritual things that they did not understand. One of the ways to help a developing leader learn how to use common things to explain spiritual life is to help him learn to explain these common things the way that Christ explained them.

One way to help a person learn to use these things to explain spiritual life is to have the person read any of the passages mentioned in this topic every day for a month. If a Christian will read John 3 every day for a month, and daily ask the Holy Spirit to teach him how to explain spiritual life from that passage, that person will know how to use physical birth to explain spiritual birth by the end of the month. Once the Holy Spirit has taught the person how to use physical birth to explain spiritual birth, that person can choose one of the other passages mentioned. He can read the passages about the bread of life, the water of life, the light, or physical and spiritual sight every day for a month while asking the Holy Spirit to teach him how to use the physical to explain the spiritual.

Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” As developing leaders learn to use the Word of God to explain spiritual life, and as they pray for boldness to share the Gospel in love, they will see the Lord work through their lives to lead others to Christ. May the Lord richly bless you as you help developing leaders learn to use various physical things to explain to others how to have spiritual life.