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College of Education
Office of the Dean

Dear Education Majors –

My hope is that in recent weeks you've been renewed by the holy season of your respective faiths. Given that it is Easter Monday, though, I'm dedicating this letter to Christianity and the most influential teacher our world has ever known, Jesus.

I think it's fair to say that **no teacher has exerted such a lasting and widespread impact as Jesus**. And so, we can salute this communicator of timeless, noble, and inspiring messages at face value only, not as a spiritual or divine being. It is strictly the work Jesus did in enlightening His followers in a 3½ year ministry that will be referenced here. In this context, He is often called "Rabbi" which translates to "teacher," and His followers, known as disciples, equates to "students." Although Jesus goes by many labels in the Gospels, more than 50 times He is referred to as teacher.

By any measure, **Jesus was an extraordinary educator**. The Bible tells us that He taught the people of His time concepts that were notable variations on much of what they had been led to believe. His teachings reinterpreted existing Hebrew scripture in a fresh and profound manner, often running counter both to conventional religious thinking and to basic human intuition. Who would think, back in those brutal times, that the meek would inherit the earth, the persecuted would enjoy eternal life, the first would be last, giving up all one had made everything possible, or that God was gracious instead of a punitive lawgiver and judge? Like any great teacher, Jesus caused His students to think about old things in new ways.

Admittedly, the miracles attributed to Jesus contributed to the great crowds of people who flocked to Him, but **it was the words of great alternative wisdom that captured hearts and imaginations**. Under Roman rule, the Jewish community consisted mostly of lowly peasants, so messages that exalted the poor, the timid, the mourning, the hungry, and the persecuted spoke deeply to them. They were eager to learn about the good news of the Gospel and a New World Order. It offered them much needed hope. And like any great teacher, Jesus assured, motivated, and inspired them.

Besides the disciples, these captivated audiences were among the first to hear everlasting truths that should resonate with all of us. In fact, **many of Christ's most memorable teachings were really lessons in character education**. He taught us about the infinite value of every person, and how we should demonstrate compassion for others by treating them as we would want to be treated. We learned that unconditional love and forgiveness will be ours if we show both to our neighbors. He explained that the merciful will be shown mercy, that leadership is actually rooted in being a servant,

that gaining the world means losing your soul, and that we are all part of a human family and will prosper most as faith communities. And, He reminded us that being sincere, pure in heart, and peace seeking were virtuous.

But beyond the great appeal of His messages, **Jesus displayed exceptional teaching instincts and technique.** These sensitivities and strategies contributed to learning and retention. For instance, He kept things simple, using words that common people could grasp, and illuminated complex concepts with brevity and clarity. Jesus was mindful that His audiences of shepherds, wives, builders, fishermen, farmers, servants, and merchants lacked sophistication. He knew that their understandings would be limited, so He doled out knowledge gradually, discerning when and how much information to give them. Great teachers know their students and meet them where they can learn; Jesus was no exception. His instruction qualified as developmentally appropriate.

Jesus also exhibited special skill with framing and answering questions and providing examples. He often used questions creatively to initiate a discussion that led to an important truth or to elicit what someone truly thought for their benefit or His own. Even His answers to questions caused learners to grow because they were so keen. He frequently employed *aphorisms*, brief sayings that were nearly unforgettable, while other answers were so intriguing that they instigated further thought.

To make His examples relevant and vivid, Jesus routinely made reference to familiar objects like seeds, coins, bread, salt, water, and wineskins. And many of his most important principles were rooted in *parables*. These short narratives, which made use of analogies, were characterized by common references that also made the examples easily learned and memorable. Who can forget the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan?

Clearly **Jesus understood human nature and possessed the ability to get at the heart of questions and issues that represented problems in daily life.** Whether through questions, answers, or examples, Jesus crystallized the insights of his followers by using language that invited them to see things in a new or different light. Great teachers recognize the value of crisp one-liners, familiar illustrations, analogies, and stories.

What separates Jesus most as an educator, though, is how universal and enduring His teachings have been. While the universality of the principles is a matter of truth, their longevity is largely attributable to teaching brilliance. The incredible impact that these rules for living have exerted on human civilization justifies our celebrating Jesus as a master teacher now and evermore.

Sincerely,



Dr. Bill Henk, Dean
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