

Answering tough questions with Jesus

“With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.”
Mark 4:33 (NIV)

Outline of talk by Jeremy Marshall

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Below is an outline of what the talk covers. Please see the corresponding session guide for more guidance on structuring the rest of the training session.

A Model drawn straight from the Bible

- The majority of the teaching from the Lord Jesus was in the form of stories, often called parables.

The Word of God is powerful

- God's word is much more powerful than anything we can say from our own intellect and our own creativity. Hebrews 4:12

Where possible always make much of Jesus

- The whole Bible is about Christ. So in answering questions with the Bible, even if we put it in our own words, we will keep the flow of conversation pointing towards Christ. Luke 24:27
- When we tell stories about Jesus, we're always on the right road, helping people to see that ultimately what we believe about him is what really matters. So many times in our conversations with our friends, we can get so easily side-tracked into all of life's little cul-de-sacs. Avoid the cul-de-sacs, go to a story about Christ.

Transcript of talk by Jeremy Marshall

You are free to use and adapt the content of this talk to suit your context.

It was at a lunchtime gathering up in the city, and the talk I was giving was drawing to a close. Then one of the participants, who I later discovered to be the boss of the whole company, asked me this question: "Are you really saying Jeremy, if there was someone in the city who was a liar, a cheat spent all their money on drugs and prostitutes, but in the end of their life, they came to God. They would be okay. But if there was someone else who always did their best, gave lots of money to charity, but felt no need of God, they wouldn't? It doesn't make any sense." It was a good open and honest question. I wonder how you would have answered it. So this is what I said in reply, "It's funny you should ask me that because people asked Jesus the very same question, and this is what He said."

I then told him from memory, the story of the prodigal son, which we find in Luke 15, if time had been short, I could have told him the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. I very

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briefly explained what the story meant, that the father is God. The oldest son is the second person in your question. And the youngest son is the first. The youngest son realised he has a problem. He must rely completely on the father's grace or the second one thinks he's fine. And that the father owes him at the end of my answer, my questioner, was surprised. He said, "oh, that's interesting. I didn't know that story was in the Bible." In my experience, the people we meet can have lots and lots of questions. When they ask me questions, as often as I can, I reply by telling them a story from the Bible.

I usually take a little time to explain about the story afterwards, as I did in that case of my friend at the lunchtime talk. But as far as possible, I rely on telling them a Bible story. Now, why would I do that? What's so helpful about that approach? Well, firstly, it's a model drawn straight out of the Bible itself. Look at the Lord Jesus. He was the greatest theological teacher of all time. And the majority of his teaching was in the form of stories often called parables. "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand."

Yes, we know he also taught his disciples pure theology, for example, the sermon on the mount, but in the main he taught the crowd with stories and with illustrations. Stories are memorable and easy to understand, even though I acknowledge of course, that the parables were also designed to some extent to hide truth. They really fit well into our culture, which rightly or wrongly values stories and personal contributions above abstract propositions. Stories are so useful in dealing with tricky questions. I've had people ask me lots and lots of questions. And for each question that they ask, I always try and respond by telling a gospel story.

For example, one asks, what about other faiths? I tell them John chapter four, about the Samaritan woman and of the tender way in which Jesus breaks down barriers and explains what true worship looks like. When asked about sex, sexually immorality in our sex obsessed world, I turned to John chapter eight and tell the actions of Jesus with the woman taken in adultery and of the way in which without condoning her sinful living, he challenges the hypocrisy of those around her or calling her to be the recipient of His grace, mercy and forgiveness.

What about when someone says, well, I'm not religious, John chapter three. I can have a fascinating time retelling them the story of Nicodemus. When as many often do, I get the question, I can't believe in a loving God with so much suffering. I love to tell him the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain, in Luke chapter seven or in his grief about the death of Lazarus in John chapter 11 and the subsequent demonstration of his power over death and evil.

What about when someone asks a question about their doubts and fears? I love to tell them the story of Jesus in the boat, in the middle of the storm, with his disciples in Mark chapter four and of His loving and gracious way with Thomas in John chapter 20 or in truth, maybe he should be called honest Thomas rather than doubting Thomas. Now occasionally an unexpected question can arise and I find that it's in those moments that the Holy Spirit prompts us with the right words to say. Recently, for example, someone asked me, "My husband just died. He didn't have any belief. Where is he now?" I thought, how on earth do I answer that? And then suddenly the story of the thief and the cross flashed into my mind and I related the grace shown to him and the answer of Jesus focusing on the only one who's able to judge the heart of any person.

So in summary answering questions where possible with stories that we had seen in the Bible is a model that we see in the Bible itself. But secondly, and more importantly, the word of God itself is

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incredibly powerful. God's word is much more powerful than anything we can say from our own intellect and our own creativity. The word of God is living and active, sharper than even a two-edged sword.

It's so important for us to deploy the word of God in our evangelism and make it available in an accessible form. Of course, it's possible to stop in a conversation and suddenly pull out our Bible to read through a passage or to send someone a link to a sermon, or to give someone a book to read. This can be unnatural and impersonal. It breaks the natural flow of discussion, it risks our friends feeling, we're Bible bashing them.

Instead, if we naturally, simply tell the Bible story, restate the Bible text in our own words, it retains their interest. It continues the conversation and often leaves the opportunity to take things further. I've been amazed at the way in which after doing this a few times, we can almost be word to word with the original Bible text. It's relatively simple to do, and is also good for your own heart and Christian growth as well. As we acknowledge that it's God's word that has the power, not our own, we are enabled to respond by saying something like, "oh, that's a great question. You know, that reminds me of a Bible story, which I found so interesting" and off we go, short snappy is the best. Tell the story naturally, briefly in your own words. Another thing I've found is that in our ever-increasingly biblical illiterate world, almost nobody knows any of the Bible stories.

They could therefore come to the hero through the work of the Holy Spirit, with immediacy and power and draw the person into wanting to know more. It's as if Bible stories or a trailer for the film of the gospel message. My follow-up is therefore always to suggest to the person next, "would you like to have a look at more of the Bible with me?", or ask your friend if it's a talk, "if you liked that story, there's loads more, would you like to read some of them with me?" Sharing Bible stories in answer to tough questions is a model we see in the Bible and it keeps us depending on God's powerful word. The final reason for answering tough questions with stories and examples from the Bible is that we want to make much of Jesus, "and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning Himself."

The whole Bible is about Christ. And so, in answering questions with the Bible, even if we put it in our own words, we will keep the flow of conversation pointing towards Christ. I found that the most effective way to do this is to tell stories about the Lord from the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I love to make more of Christ and these stories about Jesus, bring him into the conversation in such a natural way. Charles Spurgeon was a great preacher of a bygone age. He used to tell a story if you were lost every village, every Hamlet in England has a road to London. And if you find the road to London, you found where you're going. In his illustration, he would apply the road to Jesus as the road to London. It's the only way to God the Father.

It's my conviction that when we tell stories about Jesus, we're always on the "London road", we're always on the right road, helping people to see ultimately it's what we believe about him that really matters because so many times in our conversations with our friends, we can get so easily side-tracked into all of life's little cul-de-sacs. Friends avoid them, go to a story about Christ.

As we tell a story about Christ, as we keep our focus on Him, we cannot help ourselves from sharing what He's like, and of how his influence impacts upon us and is radically transforming who we are. For example, when we tell the story of Jesus with the thief on the cross, we're able to speak about how Jesus is full of love. As he was dying, He was thinking of others as He was dying,

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He has the power through his death to save, that He invites us to be with Him. And that a very small amount of faith in Him is enough. Friends, whatever we do, let's tell our friends how amazing Christ is, how much He means to us and what He's like. And I honestly believe the best way to do that is using a story about Him. How good that we have gospels that are brimming over with stories about Him. Why? It's almost as if they were written for that very purpose.

People can ask us questions for all kinds of reasons. Occasionally it's a smokescreen or a diversion, but more often than not, it's coming out of our honest desire to wrestle with or arrive at some sort of answer to a nagging question. Now there's a place for apologetics, but for most of us in our everyday lives, I have found that the simplicity of responding to these questions with an answer from the Bible is all we need, is what we see in the Bible itself. It has the power to change lives, and it makes much of Christ. Naturally, informally sharing the Bible, deepens our relationship with others and allows us to effectively sow the seeds of God's Word in their lives. Let me encourage you, get to know the Bible stories, read them regularly, immerse yourself in them, retell them to others. And when you are asked tough questions by your friends, you'll be all the better equipped and empowered to make much of Jesus in your reply.

The training video is available for anyone to watch at apassionforlife.org.uk/lc5-view