

The parable of the Master Teacher: Redemptive discipline and biblical metanarrative

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This is a story about a teacher.

CHAPTER ONE: The Master Teacher

This teacher is a Master Teacher, the principal of a prestigious school. He is a great leader, exceptional communicator and has some rather unusual strengths, but what he is known for most of all is his love and compassion.ⁱ Everyone feels like a prince or princess in his presence. His lessons are engaging and he nurtures his students in their learning with joy and enthusiasm, recognising each student as unique and full of potential. He leads his school with vision and passion and his staff worships him.

CHAPTER TWO: An Unfortunate Situation

There is a choir master in this school of whom the Master Teacher is particularly fond. Not only is he charismatic, but he has an amazing voice and he coaxes the most glorious music out of his choir. Celestial melodies and harmonies interweave in songs of praise to the Master Teacher, and drift down the corridors in a symphony of worship.

Sometimes, after work, the Master Teacher sits down with the choir master to chat about the day's events and their joy in being teachers. But one day, a tiny seed of discontent begins to grow in the choir master's mind.ⁱⁱ He waters it with his thoughts, fertilises it with his words, and protects it with his actions until it begins to consume him. He starts to resent that he is not the Master Teacher, but merely the choir master.ⁱⁱⁱ And so, with a whisper and smear campaign, he begins to undermine the Master Teacher, casting aspersions about his character, and calling into question the principles on which the school is established.^{iv} His popularity grows, and his following increases.

Finally it all comes out in the open,^v and in an unprecedented move, the choir master is dismissed from the school. Leave he does, taking with him one third of the staff and students, and a bitterness

that blinds him to the love the Master Teacher still longs to bestow on him. At this point, a precious relationship is severed, the results of which will prove devastating.^{vi}

CHAPTER THREE: A New School

As visionary educators do, the Master Teacher decides to open another school in a brand new location – a school that will run on his eternal principles of selfless love. First comes the building, strong and sturdy. Then come the furnishings. It is the latest in design and aesthetic appeal. It has everything to attract the attention of its pupils. It has plenty to engage the students in learning. It has spaces to stimulate, and places for quiet reflection. It has living things incorporated into the classroom and large outdoor learning areas. It is everything a student could desire. The curriculum is built on a foundation of love and grace and includes worship, loving relationships, and care for the environment.

In this school the Master Teacher places his pupils^{vii} ... just two at first, and he gives them freedom to learn how they choose ... with just one boundary, and just one choice to make, a choice that will be repeated by future generations of students.

It appears that everything about the new school is perfect, but into this new learning environment comes a voice of dissent. The choir master, adopting a new persona, and armed with charm and cunning, secures a position on staff. Without wasting any time, he sets out to infiltrate the school. It is here that the battle to seize control of the minds and hearts of the students begins all over again. The battle rages in the minds of the students – to choose to follow the path of selfless love or to be controlled by the spirit of selfishness. Enticed by the song of the choir master, many students make their choice; to believe the cleverly constructed lies, to satisfy their own desires rather than remember the unconditional love of the Master Teacher. Sin, in the form of a lie, breaks the circuit of life.^{viii}

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”

CHAPTER FOUR: A Dilemma and a Plan

Now the Master Teacher is faced with a dilemma. He could use his amazing powers at this point in time. He could obliterate the school and everyone in it and begin afresh. He could install robotic-like minds in his pupils so that he can control them, or he could control them by force and punishment; but he doesn't work that way. He could even banish the choirmaster and take out an affidavit to keep him off the school property, but he doesn't do any of these things. Instead, he lets his students choose. You see, he loves too much to take away their power of choice, so instead he captivates his students with love, knowing that the love that draws them into the safety of his 'way' is the same love that gives them the freedom to turn and walk away. Why would a teacher grant his students this much free-will? Because he is the epitome of love, and love means unconditional freedom.

The school enrolment increases, and the battle for the minds and hearts of the students continues. Sometimes the Master Teacher appears to be losing the battle. School is disrupted and learning comes to a standstill. A culture of fear threatens to close the school. People are hurt, anger leads to disruption, and on top of it all public and social media denigrate the Master Teacher's character. The situation appears hopeless. The Master Teacher longs to intervene, but taking control by force is the antithesis of love, and because he is love, he cannot force control.

The Master Teacher has foreseen this situation. He has a plan already in place. It is a plan constructed out of his great love, and executed by his own choice. Leaving the running of the school and implementation of the curriculum to his most trusted teachers, he takes extended leave. When he returns, he comes disguised as a pupil from a disadvantaged background. He is mocked by classmates, physically abused by bullies in the playground, and dismissed as lacking potential by some teachers. He never retaliates. He works diligently. He champions the weak. Some love him but others simply do not understand and are jealous of his status and integrity. In the end, incognito, he does what he must to demonstrate his love for his students. He buys back their right to flourish forever, a right they forfeited with their selfish choices. In a furious playground battle one Friday morning, his fellow students turn on him and he is mobbed, trussed and tied to a tree. He is stabbed and then abandoned as his gasps of pain give way to the silence of death.^{ix} The students watching become silent. Mocking tongues are still, fists uncurl and hang limply. No one laughs now. Most do not understand what is happening as a sense of foreboding settles over their school.

The choir master is not finished yet. The ethos of the school has been damaged and now he begins to demoralise the school community. A skilled spin doctor, he uses persuasion, technology, and even the words of the Master Teacher himself to sway others to his way of thinking. Despite his spin, some staff and students resist his powerful lies and foster a culture of hope amidst the fabric of fear.

CHAPTER 5: An Unprecedented Outcome

It is Monday morning. The school bell rings. Teachers are cajoling the students into lining up for morning assembly. Suddenly, the school PA system crackles into life. Listening, the students hear a familiar voice, a voice that fills them with hope and evokes memories of love. Turning they see a familiar smile, a smile that melts their rebellious spirits, and offers forgiveness. He has returned, their beloved Master Teacher!^x He is unchanged, except he carries the scars of a playground battle on his hands. His students stand in awe of his love for them, and as they once again begin to learn in his presence, they are released from the hurt and hate, the fear and frustration, the anger and anxiety that their behaviour has caused them and they learn instead the ways of love.

CHAPTER SIX: A Choice

Finally, the sounds of laughter are heard in the classroom again. The grounds echo with the excited voices of discovery as the students prepare to spend eternity learning from the One who loves them more than life. They have witnessed his love. They are free to choose, for he will not hold them against their will. Regardless of their choice, he will still love them.

This is the parable of the Master Teacher, with one crucial difference from other parables. This parable not only claims that it happened once upon a time, but that it has kept happening ever since and is happening still in every student, in every classroom through all time.

Discussion Questions

1. God is love. Love means freedom. Freedom means the power to choose. What implications does this have for how we manage classroom behaviour in Christian Schools?
2. In this parable, the students had a choice to make: to follow the path of love or the path of selfishness. What does it mean to follow the path of love or the path of selfishness? How does this concept change the way you might think about the behaviour of your students?
3. How might our understanding of the biblical metanarrative impact on our approach to behaviour management?

Teaching & Professional Practice

4. What picture of God's character does my classroom management portray? What are the implications of representing God the way I do?
5. How does the statement, 'We are punished by our sins, not for them'^{xi} fit with a philosophy of redemptive discipline?
6. What implication does the following text have for the attitude that Christian teachers should demonstrate. Psalm 86:5 'For you, Lord are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in loving-kindness to all who call upon you.'
7. Read Graham's quote.^{xiii} Discuss with a peer the implications of what he is saying.

Classroom management and discipline in a redemptive teacher's classroom is not based simply on a system of rewards and punishments, which tend to treat students more like dogs than human beings. Instead of trying to control behaviours and feelings to gain an acceptable appearance, the focus is on finding value and identity in Jesus alone. The atmosphere provides students with the freedom and challenge of making choices and being responsible for them, rather than forcing the students to comply with rules for the sake of order. Discipline builds character and takes students back to the cross for their security but not in forms that tell students they are okay if they comply and not okay if they don't.

ⁱ I John 4:8 God is love

ⁱⁱ Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 35. Little by little Lucifer came to indulge the desire for self-exaltation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 14:13-14

^{iv} Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 37. Leaving his place in the immediate presence of the Father, Lucifer went forth to diffuse the spirit of discontent among the angels. He worked with mysterious secrecy, and for a time concealed his real purpose under an appearance of reverence for God. He began to insinuate doubts concerning the laws that governed heavenly beings, intimating that though laws might be necessary for the inhabitants of the worlds, angels, being more exalted, needed no such restraint, for their own wisdom was a sufficient guide.

^v Ibid, p. 41 God permitted Satan to carry forward his work until the spirit of disaffection ripened into active revolt.

^{vi} Ibid, p. 42 Even when he was cast out of heaven, Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. Since only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of his creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 50 The holy pair were not only children under the fatherly care of God but students receiving instruction from the all-wise Creator.

^{viii} Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

^{ix} Isaiah 53:5

^x Romans 4:25

^{xi} Elbert Hubbard, in *The Note Book of Elbert Hubbard: Mottos, Epigrams, Short Essays, Passages, Orphic Sayings and Preachments* (1927) (Whitefish, MT: Kissinger, reprint 1998), 12.

^{xiii} Donovan L. Graham, *Teaching Redemptively: Bringing Grace and Truth Into Your Classroom* (2nd ed.) (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design Publications, 2009), 39.

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