

## **JESUS AND VISUALIZATION**

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Jesus Christ encouraged the use of our imagination, or visualization. He did this in four ways: one, by example; two, by exhortation; three, by prophetic promise; four, by command.

### **1. Jesus Encouraged Visualization By Example**

Jesus' greatest teaching was who He is (God incarnate) and what He did. Like the prophets and holy men of the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, He spoke (and speaks) in pictures, not just in cognitive thought. No one ever spoke like Jesus; His speech and action shows a wonderfully creative imagination that inspires our own. This includes vivid parables that are memorable, graphic sayings that are unforgettable (i.e., "*If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away ... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away*" Mt 5:29-30 RSV), and dramatic deeds.

His dramatic actions were not just a picture; they were the nearest thing to a video in that day – Jesus acting out His truth. An example was when Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. This was a dramatic enactment of Zechariah's prophecy that the Messiah would come to reign in humility and peace (Zech 9:9). Another example is found in John 21, where we see Jesus doing inner healing through vivid recall of an unforgettable memory. Remember that it was by a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest that Peter three times denied that he knew Jesus. Immediately, Jesus looked at Peter, with tremendous compassion, undoubtedly. There was no condemnation. This killed Peter; he went out and wept bitterly. Did he feel guilt? Yes, but I'm convinced that most of all he felt self hate. He had been a traitor, contrary to all his intentions. But notice, a few days later, Jesus followed up with Peter in redemptive action in an unforgettable scene. The disciples had gone back to fishing. While they were there fishing, Jesus came to the seashore. He called out to them, "*Friends have you caught any fish?*" They answered, "*No.*" Then he told them to throw the net on the right side of the boat; when they did so they caught a large number of fish. Then John cried out, "*It's the Lord.*" As soon as Peter heard this, he put on his outer garment, jumped into the sea and ran in to Jesus, while the others brought the boat. When they came ashore, they saw a fire of burning coals. If you were Peter and saw a charcoal fire there on the beach next to Jesus, tell me, what would be your first thought? Anybody who saw such a fire after denying his best friend, as Peter did, would flash back to the painful memory. Jesus knew that. But then notice the healing action. Jesus doesn't just have Peter relive the awful memory; He wants to use that charcoal fire to minister to him. And so, on the grate, or the stones around the fire, there are fish and bread. Another trigger! For three years, the offering of fish and bread was the most characteristic action of Jesus. A total of six times the Gospel writers tell us He took bread and fish, looked up to heaven, blessed God, and then broke it and blessed the multitudes with a feast like none other. So, there was first the trigger of the painful memory, but then the trigger of Peter's repeated memories: "*The Lord, He's here with fish and bread; He will minister to me; to me and my self hate; He'll provide!*" And so, they come to Jesus and He says, "*Come and have breakfast,*" and he feeds them. It is not just a typical camp breakfast, it is precious communion with the healing, risen Lord. Jesus brings in the beautiful grace of the bread and the fish to take away the hurt and then gives Peter the opportunity to

release the hurt in confession all over again. Three times He asks, “*Do you love me?*” and three times Peter exclaims, “*You know I love you*” and he is healed!

How did Jesus heal Peter? By linear teaching? By cognitive thought? No! By the use of His redemptive imagination, and provoking Peter’s memory picture. Jesus believed in encouraging vivid memory. He’s brilliant. He knew what modern media have finally learned. A picture is worth a thousand words.

## **2. Jesus Encouraged Visualization by Exhortation**

You will remember that all the way through the Gospels, especially in the KJV, is the word “***behold.***” What does it mean? It means, “look,” “see.” It is most vividly shown when He tells His famous parable in Mt 13, the parable of the sower. He introduces the parable to a group of disciples by saying, “*Behold.*” He is calling them to picture what He is about to say, and then he portrays the details of the picture:

*“Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop; some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” ( Mt 13:3-9 NKJ)*

All of these things could not have taken place while He was talking. He was telling them to visualize. He often did this. He said, “*Behold, the fowls of the air*” (Mt 6:26 KJV), “*Behold the lilies of the field*” (Mt 6:28 KJV) and “*Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and then comes the harvest?’ Behold I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields for they are already white for harvest*” (John 4:35 NKJV). Jesus obviously appeals to the use of the imagination. In His day and age, it was typical. Bible people thought in pictures. They were childlike. Have you ever met a child who doesn’t have a vivid imagination?

We live in a society that has helped to kill imagination. Bible people weren’t that way. The people of the Bible were unashamedly childlike. They were free to talk and express themselves imaginatively. I am convinced (from my five years as a church history teacher), that is how the New Testament Gospel was preserved. Most of the people did not have a Bible. There were a few rich people who might have had scrolls of parts of the Old Testament, and some of the churches might have, but they did not have the written New Testament. It was not written until about a generation after Jesus. So how was the Gospel communicated around Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, Rome, and spread over the entire empire? It was because people pictured what they were thinking, and having heard Jesus teach in His vivid and picturesque way, they retained the pictures in their own minds and retold them. The picturesque speech was easily remembered and reproduced and easily shared. So the Gospel was preserved for a generation before it was ever written.

### 3. Jesus Encouraged Visualization by Prophetic Promise

Two to three years before Jesus died, He told His disciples it was the Father's will that they not only believe in Him, but that they **behold** Him (John 6:40 NASB). In this verse, the word "behold" means to gaze – to take a long, lingering look at Him – to consider Him contemplatively. We need to think about this because it brings us to the heart of what Jesus wants to accomplish in us. In John 3:14-15 (NIV) Jesus said, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*" Jesus is referring back to Numbers 21:4-9. The people of Israel had been grumbling. The Lord had punished them by sending fiery serpents among them. The serpents were biting the people and causing them to die. The people repented and pleaded with Moses to pray for them. Moses interceded for them that the Lord might remove the serpents. The Lord instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole and to tell the people that whoever would look at the serpent (the word "look" means to gaze with perception and understanding) would be healed and live. Jesus is clearly teaching that if we will look to Him on the cross, there is wonderful healing and eternal life. Some of the people of His day could physically see Him on the cross. But obviously the rest of the world can only gaze upon Him by picturing Him. For centuries Christians have found that nothing is more beneficial than to lovingly contemplate Jesus high and lifted up upon the cross and to see Him pouring out His lifeblood for us.

Shortly before His death as He promised the Holy Spirit to the disciples, Jesus said, "*I will come to you*" (John 14:18 NASB). Then in John 14:19 (NASB) He said, "*After a little while, the world will see me no more; but you will see me.*" (The word translated "see" is the same word as "behold" in John 6:40.) He is not talking about the resurrection, but He is talking about the Holy Spirit. It is a principle of biblical interpretation that context determines interpretation, and here Jesus is teaching about the Holy Spirit. That is clinched by verse 23 where it indicates that He is talking about coming permanently to abide in us.

In John 14:21 (NKJV), Jesus speaking of those who love Him, says, "*I will manifest myself to him.*" This can also be translated, "*I will make myself visible to him,*" or "*I will reveal and show myself to him.*" He, of course, means that He will show Himself to us through the Spirit. We could also translate this verse "*I will be real to you.*"

A little later, Jesus told His disciples in John 17:24 (NIV), "*Father, I want those You have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory.*" The word "see" is in the present tense. Jesus is saying that He wants us to keep on seeing Him as an ongoing experience. We don't have to wait until heaven. Paul tells us about this in 2 Cor 3:18. The idea in this text, which all early translations of the Bible understood, is that when a person turns to Christ, the hardening of unbelief is taken away, "*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another*" (RSV). The meaning of the key present participle is that we gaze on Jesus, as in a mirror, by the power of the Holy Spirit (see NASB 2 Cor 3:18). If you have ever used your imagination to picture Jesus with you, at times it seems as though you are seeing Him in a miraculous mirror. You start out picturing Him and then as you continue visualizing, imperceptibly, you begin to see Him as though in a vision coming to you. It's an amazing thing. The more you

are taken up with beholding Him, the more you find yourself becoming like Him. It's the old principle of "what gets your imagination, gets you."

The Christian saints down through the ages discovered this. They discovered that there are things we can do to make ourselves more susceptible to seeing the Lord. One of the things they've learned is that we can do this through repetition. If you've noticed, in charismatic worship, we repeat similar phrases over and over. We repeat them in rhyme, in singing, and in prayers to the Lord. We know that in the repeating of those phrases in a reflective way, it opens us up to the presence of the Lord. The Lord inhabits the praises of His people, especially repetitive praise.

Another thing the saints learned is that when we relax in the Lord's presence, and get silent and wait upon Him – this is another tremendous way in which the Lord breaks through to our spirit. It's a way of being receptive – to open ourselves to the action of the Lord.

But the saints have discovered another thing, too, and that is that through the use of visualization, we make ourselves more susceptible to see Jesus with us. We know from the history of Christian spirituality, that this method of prayer was practiced from the earliest years of the church. It became enormously popular through the monastic movement and was popularized by Ignatius Loyola in the Sixteenth Century, who disciplined many outstanding Christian leaders by teaching them to visualize the great scenes of the New Testament and to see themselves involved in the action. This is a powerful weapon in prayer and the growth of strong Christian character.

#### 4. **Jesus Encouraged Visualization by Command**

It will probably surprise you to know that Jesus, in effect, commanded us to picture His passion. At the Last Supper, you will remember that Jesus commanded His disciples, "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Luke 22:19; see also 1 Cor 11:24-25). The word "remembrance" comes from a Greek word that is untranslatable in English. It means to recall or relive the person or event being remembered. Jesus had much more in mind than a mere repetition of the table fellowship and the breaking of the bread and the blessing of a cup in an atmosphere of prayer. He wanted us to vividly recall the events of His passion and particularly His sacrifice for us upon the cross in such a way that it is as if it is happening all over again today. I do not know of any way to do that without visualization. Apparently a great host of others have felt the same way, especially the prayer warriors and the hymn and songwriters. When we read the great prayer books and hymns of church history, they are full of visualizations of Jesus and especially of His cross. One example among thousands is the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Consider the third stanza, "*See, from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down; did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?*" Or consider the contemporary song, "Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord" by Paul Baloche. "*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, Open the eyes of my heart; I want to see You, I want to see You.*"

I remember when I was a brand-new convert and one of the men who was mentoring me was talking to me about my struggles with prayer. I couldn't concentrate. Can you identify with that?

I still remember this dear man saying to me, “Bob, try this. Go into your room and kneel down at a chair. Fold your hands, close your eyes, and look up. Then imagine that Jesus is standing right there in front of you, nearer than breathing, mighty in His resurrection, looking at you with love. Then start your prayer.” I am telling you, that one thing, revolutionized my prayer life. I wasn’t praying to a dim God far off somewhere, but I was praying to God who is near, real, wonderful and listening. Picturing Him helped me to realize that.

### **Application of Jesus’ Encouragement to Visualize**

It is most important that we apply the encouragement of Jesus to the post-modern age. One reason will suffice – the rampant increase of internet pornography. This evil is now engaging the minds of the majority of our young people. It inflames evil imagination. It is a very serious matter because what captures the imagination, controls the person. This is evident in the shocking statistics of runaway sexual promiscuity and depravity, especially among teenagers and young adults.

There are answers to this problem of evil imagination, but none more effective than the practice of positive Christian visualization. If a person hooked on pornography will daily, prayerfully, visualize a scene from the Gospels, their imagination will be conquered by Christ and they will be cleansed of evil pictures. If they practice the discipline of seeing Christ always with them in every situation, especially when tempted, they can overcome lustful urges.

Yet, at the very time when positive Christian visualization is so desperately needed, we have some badly informed people telling us that visualization is occult, and/or is to be avoided as dangerous. This is a serious case of ignorance, bad logic and unfounded fear. Yes, visualization is used in some occult and New Age practices. But so also is prayer! Does that mean that all prayer should be avoided because occultists use it? Certainly not. Almost everyone visualizes – especially when they are coveting or lusting or looking forward to a good dinner or dreaming of an upcoming vacation. Whether or not it is good or evil depends upon the motive and the object. In our practice, the object is to seek the Lord and His healing for our lives so that we may live fully for His purposes.

We agree that all occultic practices such as sorcery, divination and spiritualism, are forbidden in the Bible and are to be avoided at all costs. But visualization is not forbidden in the Bible. When we pray for people at any length, we inquire as to whether they or their parents have been involved in the occult, and we lead them to repent and renounce such practices in the name of Jesus. We do everything in a context of total submission to God in Christ, calling upon the leading of the Holy Spirit and seeking the enablement of His gift, particularly wisdom and discernment.

There are others who reject visualization because they fear false imagination. You might ask questions like, “What if I picture Jesus saying and doing things to me or with me that are not really so?” If it happens in the presence of two other mature Christians who are praying with you, and share it with them, they can discern whether it is according to the truth of Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit. And also, if you are in doubt, you can and should pray for confirmation and can seek the counsel of a Christian leader. The situation is no different from

how one decides whether or not a passage they read in Scripture is really a personal word from the Lord to them and whether or not they should act on it.

For those who fear false visualization, or the deception of the enemy, let me assure you that for over thirty years I have prayed for hundreds of people, inviting them to see Jesus with them in their times of crisis and have also been in touch with others doing the same ministry. I do not know of a single instance where someone was injured emotionally, or was drawn away from faith and repentance towards Jesus Christ. To the contrary, most people have reported that prayerful visualization has helped them to have a more intimate and honest relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord.