



Biblical Insights Into Jesus’ Debating Skills



A public servant can learn much about debating skills from this week’s Bible passage. As I strive to serve you and make the Scriptures practical and applicable, I am constantly praying and thinking about your life in elected office and what is most pertinent in the passage relative to that, being careful to not sacrifice authorial intent.

This week I cannot help but observe how the desperation of Jesus’ enemies impelled them to publicly discount the Lord’s credibility. Sound familiar? The failure of Jesus’ foes to win debates in previous encounters has so frustrated and infuriated them that they, in this week’s passage, become absurd in their attacks. Imagine that!

Let us critically examine this and the previous passages relative to Jesus’ debating skills and see what we can learn about improving ours. This promises to be a rich study—especially as you approach the primaries and upcoming November elections.

Read on, my friend.

Ralph Drollinger

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day were jealous and envious of the new itinerant Rabbi. Judaism under these leaders was degenerate and selfishly led. It follows that Jesus was a real threat to them. Increasingly jealous of His increasingly large following, they quite reasonably feared Jesus would take away their limelight and undermine their authority. They were progressively envious of what He possessed.

As we will see from these debates, such circumstances and settings make for volatile exchanges. Jealousy and envy are often the fertile soil of ugly and angry eruptions. James captures this cause-and-effect relationship in his epistle when he summarily states, *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing* (James 3:16). Such is vividly portrayed in this week’s passage!

Jealousy is rooted in insecurity: it is fear someone will take what you possess; whereas envy is rooted in theft: it is the desire to take what another possesses.

Similarly, insecure thieves may face you on the debate stage, as they did here with Jesus. So be prepared my friend! Herein you’ll learn how Jesus *properly* dealt with the *jealousy* and *selfish ambition* (envy) of others. That is the aim of this study! But first be aware of this human condition, and guard against such sinful cravings in your own fallen heart. Knowing how Jesus dealt with *jealousy* and *envy* will equip you with the ammunition to fend off these depraved and decrepit mo-

tives not only in others, but of first importance, in yourself.

In what follows from the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, notice how the interactions progress in each of the five ensuing encounters (I will list them for you).

What are some lessons you and I can learn from a close examination of these Markian inclusions? What can we learn about debating skills from the world’s perfect debater? Let us examine these passages with that pursuit in mind.

II. THE PASSAGE: MARK 3:20-26

And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, “He has lost His senses.” The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.” And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!”

Mark is recording the fact that Jesus is being attacked internally by His own people, members of His own household



(v. 21), and externally by the Scribes (v. 22). It is important to observe from this passage that sometimes the worst attacks on us come from those who are closest to us. Be the adversaries close or distant, Jesus states elsewhere that attacks are to be expected—they are normative—in the lives of those who are courageous and who stand for truth. Matthew 5:11 states in this regard:

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.”

In fact, Jesus is saying here that persecution is not only normative for truth tellers, but that you are *blessed* when you encounter it! What follows are pertinent portions from each of the interactions that precede the above summary passage. Herein recorded and on display for us to learn from are Jesus’ responses to His attackers via His Spirit-empowered and Spirit-led debating skills. Again,

What debate principles can you glean from these encounters in order to be more Christlike?

III. DISTILLATIONS FROM THE FIVE PREVIOUS DEBATES

Prior to this passage of study, Mark records five interactions between Jesus and the false religious leaders. Notice from each of these biblical texts how He effectively wins His position each time.

Here are nine characteristics of an effective debater as evidenced in and by Jesus.

A. THE DEBATE OVER THE AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SIN: MARK 2:7–11

“Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”— He said to the paralytic “I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.”

B. THE DEBATE OVER WHO IS SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE: MARK 2:16–17

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” And hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

C. THE DEBATE OVER THE PURPOSE OF FASTING: MARK 2:18–19

John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.”

VERSE OF THE WEEK



Mark 2:8–9

Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk’?”



Jesus, time and time again uncovers illogical or non-contextual statements with His lucid command of Scripture and His reasoning ability! How are you in terms of doing the same?



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D. THE DEBATE OVER WORKING ON THE SABBATH: MARK 2:23-27

And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?" Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."

E. THE DEBATE OVER HEALING ON THE SABBATH: MARK 3:1-4

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!" And He said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?" But they kept silent.

IV. OBSERVATIONS REGARDING DEBATE PRINCIPLES

Stemming from each of these passages are nine characteristics of an effective debater as evidenced in and by Jesus. They are as follows:

A. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER IS PERCEPTIVE

Jesus was perceptive, (perception: "intuitive recognition" and "intelligent discernment") intently looking into the heart of His opponents as they spoke. While the other is speaking, a good listener isn't someone who spends his time thinking about what he's going to say next, what he can add to the conversation from his vast repertoire of past experiences—some story no one really cares to hear about. Rather, a good listener concentrates on each word being spoken, silently and intently studying the one speaking, asking the Holy Spirit to give him insights based on the other person's train of thought, choice of words, tone, inflection, facial expressions, and body language. James codifies this necessary ingredient for becoming a perceptive listener when he said, *be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger* (1:19). God gave you two ears and only one mouth; you cannot be a good debater until you are an excellent listener.

Jesus was especially perceptive in this way: He was not naïve regarding the base nature of man.

He knew that jealousy and envy are often the motives for speech and actions.

If you possess a Christian worldview (man is fallen and evil) you will be looking out for this at all times; if you have a Humanist worldview (man is basically good and in need of a better environment) you will probably not. Whereas the former belief is the basis of what the book of Proverbs deems as a *wise* person, the latter is the basis of what the book of Proverbs deems as a *simpleton* or a *fool*-



ish person. It follows that the best debaters are informed by a biblical worldview. A perceptive person is one who can best figure things out because he is listening to the other person through the lens of Scripture! Matthew 22:18 summarily states of Jesus in regards to this point, ***But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?”*** Don’t be naïve, be *perceptive* to the possible fallen nature of your opponent in a debate.

B. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER IS COURAGEOUS

Jesus was not timid; in each of the aforementioned rounds of debate He unabashedly and forthrightly stated the truth of a matter. Courage is “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty,” according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Jesus never equivocated on the truth when debating. He called it like it was with no fear of the consequences.

Jesus did not base His actions on anticipated reactions. He was always forthright.

Too often public servants measure their actions based upon the calculation of consequences versus what is patently right or wrong based upon scriptural truth. Whereas the former is cowardly, the latter is courageous. James 4:17 states, ***Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*** Paul said to Timothy point blank, ***For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline*** (2 Timothy 1:7). Jesus promised all of His disciples, ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”*** (Acts 1:8). One cannot be an effective debater apart from the empow-

erment of the Holy Spirit who emboldens the believer with manifest courage!

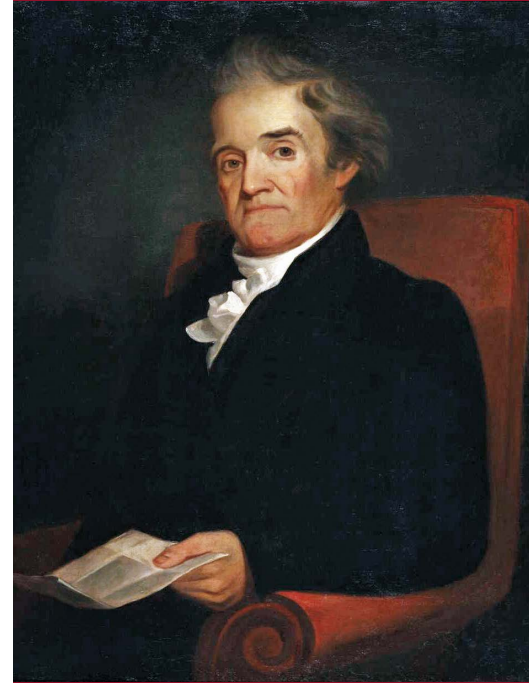
C. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER SUMMARIZES AND COUNTERS

When observing the aforementioned passages, notice that Jesus often at some point distills the other’s position while simultaneously countering it: ***“Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?”*** is an excellent example! More broadly, you gain much in a debate when you accurately and fairly parrot back a summation of the other’s position by stating something to the effect, “Let me accurately summarize what I think you are saying.” Such attempts to understand the other’s point of view carries favor with everyone and testifies to your listening skills and personal integrity. In fact the book of Proverbs often speaks about gaining *understanding*: ***Incline your heart to understanding*** (2:2). ***Lift your voice for understanding*** (2:3). To my point here, note the results of such a spirit: ***How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding*** (3:13). First, on the debate stage, be about making sure you precisely *understand* what your opponent is postulating.

Always accurately summarize the erroneous thinking of your opponent before heralding the contrasting biblical principle that underlies what you stand for.

Note this in Jesus’s debating skills from the Mark 2 passage: ***“Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to***

Noah Webster



“[T]he Christian religion ... is the basis, or rather the source, of all genuine freedom in government. ... I am persuaded that no civil government of a republican form can exist and be durable in which the principles of Christianity have not a controlling influence.”

— Noah Webster, revolutionary soldier, judge, legislator, educator, “Schoolmaster to America.”

K. Alan Snyder, *Defining Noah Webster: Mind and Morals in the Early Republic* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 253, to James Madison on October 16, 1829.



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say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk?’”

Of all the debates skills on display here, to this point in our outline (that a good debater summarizes and counters) Jesus encapsulates their erroneous position (in this case whether He was God) and then swiftly counters, in essence saying, “no you’re wrong about that!”

D. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER ANSWERS IMMEDIATELY

Jesus had anticipated where the debate would lead, and had adequately prepared His responses enabling Him to answer quickly. In Jesus’s debate with Satan, as recorded in Matthew 4, He answered the Scripture twister, Satan, effectively and immediately because He knew the Word of God *and very importantly, the context of the Word of God!* (Beware! Satan was and remains skilled at ripping Bible passages from context—such could be the case with the person you are engaging!)

In His debate with Satan, Jesus’s scriptural agility led to His victory in each of the three rounds of exchange (cf. Matthew 4:1–11). So victorious was Jesus that at the end of the debate Matthew records, *then the devil left Him*. Satan lost the debate because knowledge and truth always win out! Are you prepared with scriptural principles, biblical truth, to apply and win in such a contest? God’s Word is immutable and *sharper than any two-edged sword* (Hebrews 4:12).

The spiritual status of the one you are debating could be someone who is *dead in your* [his] *trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2:1). In fact, everyone who has not yet bowed the knee to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ is *dead in your* [their] *trespasses and sins*. It could be that you are debating someone who is *held captive by*

him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26). It could be that your *struggle* in the debate *is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). It could be that you are debating a pawn of the Devil. The importance of your *immediate* command of Scripture should never be underestimated in such circumstances!

E. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER SPEAKS WITH AUTHORITY

Jesus responded with a strong and confident tone. Because of convictions that are based in truthfulness, His answers were tight, profound, and enunciated with authority. He was commanding because He already knew what He believed. Are you characterized by these words as a loving *ambassador for Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:20) when debating someone whose arguments are specious and baseless?

Truth is objective, not subjective.

Only such an inner-held premise leads to outward authoritativeness.

Matthew 7:28–29 states, *When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

F. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER FLIPS AN ARGUMENT ON ITS HEAD

Jesus turns the tables boldly as He summarily exploits improper inferences



George Washington

based on faulty deductions and out-of-context Scripture twisting. For example, in the Matthew 4 temptation account, Satan is offering Jesus the world—as if Satan owned it (cf. 4:8–10)! Jesus must have been laughing inside since He is the one who created the world and reigns sovereign over it!

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.’”

Oh, how many times have I heard public servants quote Scripture completely out of context in order to support their man-made premises! But what’s sadder still is that other believers, who do not know the Scripture, don’t realize what their opponent is doing! In the Markian passages of the Gospels previously quoted, Jesus, time and time again uncovers illogical or non-contextual statements with His lucid command of Scripture and His reasoning ability! How are you in terms of doing the same?

G. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER IS ILLUSTRATIVE

Public speakers are wisely advised, “Don’t tell me, show me.” In a debate, a good simile not only makes your point understandable, but it will also be remembered long after the contest is over. Jesus illustrated His counterpoints with easy-for-everyone-to-understand parables. As His earthly ministry came to a close, Matthew 13:34 states, *All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak anything to them without a parable.*

Parables are picturesque parallels of profound biblical truth.

He was a master at parables and word pictures! In this week’s passage He states no fewer than four (vv. 23–26) word pictures! Are you easy to understand, yet profoundly truthful?

H. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER IS PATIENT

Likened to a professional tennis player who waits for the right moment to deliver the kill shot, Jesus said as little as possible and let His opponents talk. What resulted became increasingly desperate and absurd, their charges outlandish and illogical. Jesus’ patience and pacing led to His opponents’ self-destruction; they undermined their own credibility by the words from their own mouths. When ideas are not rooted in the immutability and veracity of the Word of God, their flaws will surface in due time. The take-away here—

Metaphorically speaking, give your opponent enough rope to hang himself.

Wait patiently and then deliver the kill shot. States Paul in describing the words of those whose thinking is not tethered to Scripture, *Professing to be wise, they became fools* (Romans 1:22).

I. AN EFFECTIVE DEBATER IS TRANSCENDENT

Lastly, Jesus thought and communicated with added dimension; He always displayed an eternal perspective to the problem(s) at hand. Do you ever do that? His solutions were transcendent, outside the box. If Jesus were a legislator,



From his speech to the Delaware Indian Chiefs

“You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are.”

— George Washington, first president of the United States, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, member of the Continental Congress, president of the Constitutional Convention, “Father of His Country,” judge.

George Washington, *The Writings of Washington*, John C. Fitzpatrick, editor (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), Vol. XV, 55, from his speech to the Delaware Indian Chiefs on May 12, 1779.



He would have proffered creative, biblically-based determinations for societal problems based on a realistic understanding of the human condition, a biblical understanding of the role of government, and the ultimate need of new life in Christ! John 14:6 combined with John 8:32 serve to make the point: *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth and life; no one comes to the Father but through me."* "[Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Transcendent biblically-based determinations, proffered by the debater are what work and remain standing! Transcendent solutions are in stark contrast to making negative, belittling ad-hominem remarks about your opponent.

This is an interesting observation. Our communicative actions must be informed by similar wisdom. Jesus possessed the acumen to know what form of interaction was most timely and suitable for each and every audience He faced.

When it came to debate, He was the greatest of all. He used the above principles to utterly silence His opponents! May we increase in this skill, not for the purposes of egotistical superiority or selfish advancement, but for the sake of the gospel, truth, and the service of our society. If you possess biblical truth, and your legislative ideas are solely founded on its precepts, then you are in a position to win over an opponent with secularist-based ideas every time.

May I add this: don't be afraid to cite the Bible as your authority for a position you hold. When your opponent questions or challenges its authority simply respond by saying, "Are you suggesting that your authority on this matter should be trusted over and above the Bible? It seems to me that you're suggesting you're smarter than God. Should we trust in God's immutable truth or in fallible, human opinions?"

V. SUMMARY

The Savior was
proclamatory when
preaching (Luke 4:18), silent
when suffering (Acts 8:32),
debating when defending.



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