

BECOMING A BETTER TEACHER

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I. Preliminary remarks

A. The purpose of these lessons, as I understand it, is to share with others how one develops and uses one's talents or gifts. With that in mind, I've titled this class "Becoming a Better Teacher."

B. Those who've sat through some of my classes may be wondering what I'm doing teaching a class on becoming a better teacher. I see that little thought bubble over your head: "Physician, heal thyself." But it now would be way too embarrassing for you to get up and leave.

C. My comments tonight are aimed mainly at teaching Bible classes in the congregation – *adult* Bible classes. Teaching children requires talents and a patience that I cannot claim. I do, however, want to encourage those of you who teach children (and you who might teach them) with a story from my life. Before I became a Christian, I was as worldly and irreligious as anyone you can imagine. After I became a Christian, my mom told me that when I was a little boy – I'm talking about 3, 4, and 5 – I was crazy about my Sunday school teacher. She said he came to visit me when I had my tonsils removed. I had no recollection of that, but I have no doubt that the seeds that man planted helped to open my heart to the gospel when brother John started hounding me with it many years later.

D. I realize that teaching is done in other venues, but Bible classes are the classic situation for the exercise of one's teaching gift. I hope you'll be able to transfer at least some of this to wherever you teach.

E. I want to start by assuring you that it's a good thing to be a teacher.

1. When Jesus told the disciples in Mat. 23:10 that they weren't to be called "teachers," he meant they were not to assume the role of spiritual masters having their own disciples. The word he uses there for teacher is *καθηγητής*. It means master or private tutor. The only time it's used in the entire N.T. or the LXX is in Mat. 23:10. The point is that, as disciples of Christ, we are not to encourage or accept an attitude of personal allegiance to us. There is only one spiritual master, the Christ, and every disciple's allegiance is to him.

2. Christians are called teachers in Acts 13:1, 1 Tim. 2:7, and Heb. 5:12. Indeed, there is even a spiritual gift of teaching that enables some people to be identified as teachers (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29).

3. In saying that not many of his addressees should become teachers, James was referring in Jas. 3:1 to their present state of spiritual immaturity. Not many of them were *ready* to be teachers. In Heb. 5:12, the writer rebukes the immature for not progressing in faith so as to be able to teach. So James and the writer of Hebrews are addressing immaturity from different directions. James says, in essence, you're too immature to be teaching; the Hebrew writer says you shouldn't be so immature.

II. Some general things a teacher should keep in mind

A. Teaching is a serious responsibility.

1. As a teacher, you are God's messenger; you are presuming to communicate to people the word of the Lord. We don't like it if someone misrepresents us, if they tell others that we said something or meant something we never said or meant. God feels the same way. Therefore, we cannot dare to speak for God without struggling to the best of our ability to represent him accurately. I think that's the idea behind the title of James Crenshaw's book, *Trembling at the Threshold of a Biblical Text*.

2. It is one thing to misunderstand something when you've honestly wrestled to understand it; it's another thing to misunderstand something because you haven't cared enough to labor at the task. In that case, you not only misrepresent God but also dishonor him by treating his message as something unworthy of your time and effort.

B. The power is in the word of God.

1. As Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Your job as a teacher is to convey the meaning of Scripture, to present to people the truths God has revealed. Everything is to be geared toward that end. You must take care not to confuse your own desires and ideas with what God's Spirit is saying through human writers in the text.

2. And because the power is in the word of God, you cannot shy away from its truths no matter how politically incorrect they may be in our present culture. That not only is unfaithfulness; it also is cowardice. It is a withholding from people the truth they need so they won't think less of you. Real love is being willing to risk rejection and even hostility in order to be a blessing.

a. In 2 Tim. 4:1-2 Paul tells Timothy, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction." "In season" is when it's convenient for the teacher and/or his hearers; "out of season" is when it's not convenient. That is the measure of a messenger: fidelity in transmission.

b. I've read that in his book *Ashamed of the Gospel*, John MacArthur, Jr. provides the following quotes from church bulletins of various religious groups (p. 47):

- "There is no fire and brimstone here. No Bible-thumping, just practical, witty messages."
- "You won't hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners."
- "[Our preacher] doesn't even use the 'H'-word. Call it Light Gospel. It has the same salvation as the Old Time Religion, but with a third less guilt."
- "The sermons are relevant, upbeat, and best of all, short."

C. There are limits to what you can do. If you don't appreciate that, you'll more quickly fall prey to discouragement. Specifically, you need to realize:

1. You cannot *make* people agree with you. All you can do is invite them to share your understanding of Scripture by laying out for them the reasons you understand it as you do. If you can accept that, your teaching ministry will be less stressful.

2. Changing understanding often is a longer process than one class. People have to be ready to hear what you're saying before they can absorb it. And I don't just mean they have to be *willing* to hear it; they have to be at a point in their theological journey that they're able to process what you're saying. If you're addressing questions someone is not yet asking, the import of what you're saying will be lost on them.

D. Pray for God to use you to teach his people what he wants them to learn. Ask him to grant you wisdom, clarity, and humility, and pray that those you teach will have the wisdom to separate the truths you present from any misunderstandings you may have.

III. Having something to teach

A. Teaching is the act of imparting knowledge (or a skill) to another. So to teach you must have knowledge to impart. You can't teach what you don't know.

1. That means that to be a teacher you must be a student of the Bible. You must have a decent grasp of Scripture's overall message and its basic teachings. And that only comes from spending many hours reading and meditating.

2. I'm not saying, obviously, that one must have formal training in biblical studies to teach. I'm simply saying, as Paul said to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:15, that you must "[b]e diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."

3. And no matter how good your general knowledge of the Scriptures is, you must spend time studying and preparing to teach the specific topic you will be teaching. Being a gifted teacher is not a get-out-of-preparation-free card. You can be the most gifted teacher on the planet, but if you haven't labored to put together a lesson, you will have cheated both God and your brothers and sisters in Christ. You wouldn't fail to prepare for a 45-60 minute presentation you were making to clients or your boss, so why think that God will be satisfied with less?

B. Now I realize that the image of a Bible teacher as one who imparts knowledge to those he's teaching rubs some of us the wrong way. Some feel it's arrogant or presumptuous to think one is in a position to teach the Bible to other believers – I mean, we're all priests, right? So to be sure nobody thinks the teacher thinks he knows more than anybody else, some teachers bend over backwards *not* to teach. Instead, they make it their goal to facilitate a discussion among people who have not prepared a lesson! The goal shifts from conveying knowledge to the group to helping the group bond together and feel closer. That's an important goal and it has its place, but it's distinct from the task of teaching. As teachers, we must keep our eye on the teaching ball.

C. Recommendations for gaining basic familiarity with the Bible

1. I'm convinced that if you're a gifted teacher, you will be a motivated learner. In fact, I suspect that a motivation to learn is part of the gift of teaching. But here are a few thoughts that I hope will help you to be more effective in your pursuit of a basic familiarity with Scripture.

2. Use a standard, modern English translation (e.g., NASU, NIV, NRSV, NET, ESV, CSB). For most people, the KJV is difficult to understand because so many English words have become obsolete or shifted meaning since the 17th century. (If you were raised on it and have already worked through all these questions, you might be an exception.) I don't recommend you do your regular reading from paraphrases or very loose translations, though I think they're fine to use as a supplement.

3. Find a comfortable place and choose a time when you can regularly read without being disturbed, and then be disciplined about keeping that time.

4. Concentrate *first* on the N.T. Just read it through several times to get a feel for its message and dominant themes. I understand that the O.T. is the word of God and necessary to study, but since Christ is the one to whom the O.T. points, I think the N.T. is the correct end of the telescope to look through.

5. Learn a general chronology of Bible events and writings. (You can do that through the resources I'll mention in just a moment.) It helps to understand the writings if you know where they fit in the flow of history.

6. Learn about the different types or genres of biblical literature. I remember what a revelation it was to grasp the idea the Colossians, for example, was a

letter written by Paul to a group of Christians in Colossae. I now had a framework for getting at what Paul was saying.

7. Regularly attend the Bible studies at Mesa (or your congregation).

D. Some resources for deeper study

1. See "Select Resources for Bible Teachers" at this site under "Other Stuff."

2. Commentaries are, of course, the author's attempt to explain God's truth behind each passage in a book. Some certainly are better than others, but I consider them invaluable in doing in depth study. For \$50 or less you can have access to a decade or more of a scholar's labor. I find them quite a bargain.

a. I am not one who shies away from commentaries because they're merely the word of man. Certainly they're the word of man, but so is all teaching that is not inspired by God. If being the word of man makes commentaries unworthy of reading, then being the word of man makes our Bible classes unworthy of attending. If I thought that was the case, I wouldn't be teaching in the first place.

b. Neither am I one who shies away from commentaries written by Jewish scholars or others outside the church of Christ. The fact we all read and study from translations and Bible dictionaries produced by people outside the church shows we already understand that one can be a good scholar and produce worthy material without being in the brotherhood. What I want in a commentary is a knowledgeable and reliable source of information from someone who takes the Bible seriously and who explains the bases of his conclusions. I'll sort through the offering and separate the meat from the bones.

c. I understand the caution that some have regarding biblical scholarship. There are plenty of examples of scholars who wandered into theological liberalism, and I don't doubt that their education had something to do with it. But I think turning one's back on scholarship in general is throwing the baby out with the bath water. It's also impossible, because we are dependent on scholars for the meaning of the ancient languages in which Scripture was written and for knowledge about the culture and literary context of those writings. I say use scholars but do so with discernment.

IV. Communicating what you want to teach

A. Organization

1. You must have a logical organization to your presentation or people simply cannot absorb it. If they cannot see how the piece you're currently presenting relates to the whole, they cannot see the point. Your lesson becomes a barrage of isolated facts that quickly will be forgotten without leaving the remains of a point.

2. I'm not sure this can be taught, but I think progress can be made if you'll learn how to outline. That forces you to put fit the pieces into a coherent whole.

B. Time management

1. You want to be sure that you have enough time to make the points you want to make. Usually, you're making a number of points, so you can stop conveniently after any one of them.

2. What you want to avoid is building during the class toward a major conclusion and then not having time to finish it. That leaves people unsatisfied. If you see that happening, you might make a mid-class adjustment and cut out some material. Or, if you know going in that your point will span more than one class, you can let people know that so they don't feel like they were left hanging.

3. And should you finish saying what you wanted to say before the class is over, just stop. Don't feel compelled to fill the time with stuff you wouldn't want to sit through. Trust me; people won't be angry if you end the class early. Follow the advice of Mr. Ed, the talking horse. You remember that he'd never speak unless he had something to say.

C. Rate of information

1. The flow or rate of information should not be too fast or too slow for your audience. If it's too fast, they'll turn you off because they're lost; if it's too slow they'll turn you off because they're bored.

2. This is tricky and requires a feel for your audience. My tendency is to assume that most adults in the church have a decent biblical background and can handle a fairly brisk flow of information. Obviously, if you're teaching new converts you'd have to choke that flow.

D. Clarity of expression

1. You must work to express clearly what you're trying to communicate. Communication is a difficult thing, and it is easier than you might think to be misunderstood.

2. So, especially with regard to any subtle point, I recommend that you actually write out how you want to express it. That way, however much you wander you can come back to that statement to be sure you've made the point as best you can.

3. Part of expressing oneself clearly is having a decent command of the English language. You don't have to be an orator, but you need to know how to put words

together to convey ideas. If you feel you're deficient in that regard, perhaps taking some English or speech classes would help.

4. Part of communicating clearly is not using words that many in your audience don't understand. I know I am guilty of this. After one class, a sister let me know that some word I had used sent her off on a mental journey trying to figure out what I meant, and in the process she missed what I said after that.

E. Aids

1. Visual aids can be very helpful in communicating. If you've got access to PowerPoint and a projector, you can do all kinds of things to help people follow your thinking and to illustrate your points. You're all familiar with that, as David uses it in his sermons and classes. (The irony of my not using it tonight is not lost on me.)

2. Of course, you must take the time to prepare the PowerPoint and make sure it's integrated into your presentation.

3. If you don't have access to PowerPoint, the "poor man's PowerPoint," a chalk board or marker board, still works.

F. Anticipate questions

1. You cannot anticipate every question people will have to what you're teaching, and even if you could you wouldn't have time to address them all, but I think you should at least recognize and address the obvious questions.

2. If you're planning to address something a bit later in the lesson, you may alert people to that so they don't spend their time fretting over how what you said fits with something else. They then can continue listening knowing that you're at least going to take a shot at answering what's on their mind.

G. Passion

1. You must have some passion about what you're teaching. If you're not jazzed about the subject, how can you expect people you're trying to teach to be interested?

2. That's why it's so important that you develop a lesson you're excited about presenting, a lesson that says something you think will bless people. That's why I generally shy away from teaching someone else's material – it takes too long to take it in and "make it my own" so that I can present it with some enthusiasm.

V. Practical experience

A. There is no substitute for practical experience, so if you think you are able to teach and would like to do so, let the elders or deacons involved in education know, and I'm sure you will be given opportunities.

B. If this is the area in which you can best serve and it's something you want to do, the Lord will make that happen, though maybe not in your time frame.

VI. Dangers

A. As you grow in your knowledge through your teaching ministry, you must be careful not to look down on people who may not know as much as you do.

1. You didn't always know as much as you do now, and believe me, there are many people who know a lot more than you do. That always will be true. So keep your feet on the ground.

2. Remember that, though we are all different in the body of Christ, we all serve the same Lord. The fact you do it through teaching makes you no better or worse than one who does it in some other way.

B. And as you grow in your knowledge, you must be careful not to think you have nothing more to learn. The Bible has occupied some of the greatest minds on this planet for their entire lives, so you can be sure you haven't exhausted it.

C. You also must be careful not to lose balance in your Christian life and think that being a teacher exempts you from other Christian responsibilities. You may be called to *major* in teaching, but your Christian life cannot be reduced to that.