

LESSON SIX

Preparing the Bible Study Lesson

The three articles that are part of this lesson originally related to sermons. They are part of a book on preaching that I wrote back in the 90's. They first appeared as articles in the *Firm Foundation*, and, upon completion were compiled and published on www.ThyWordIsTruth.com. It was not my desire to profit personally, but to profit others. Had it been published as a book the title would have been "The Great Gulf Fixed; Bridging the Great Gulf between the Pulpit and the Pew." Since the principles contained are also applicable to teaching Bible Study, they are adopted and adapted here to that purpose.

LESSON PREPARATION

Lesson preparation is to the teacher what meal preparation is to the homemaker – no sooner is one lesson prepared and served than it is all to do over again. How old it gets. How can I prepare something fresh? Something that they will like? Something that will provide a balanced diet? How can essential but distasteful dietary elements be palatably prepared but still retain essential vitamins and minerals? Fortunately for the homemaker, there are recipe books and meal planning aids that enable her to keep attractive and nutritious meals on the table and still keep the house clean and run the

family taxi. But what does the teacher do? A “little book” provides skeletal information and organization for themes selected by someone else for other people and other occasions. Commentaries provide more than skeletal information, but it is neither organized for a lesson nor adapted to a specific audience. How can the teacher prepare lessons week after week, month after month, year after year, and maintain his class’s appetite and spiritual health?

While there are many aspects of lesson preparation that vary from teacher to teacher and even from lesson to lesson, there is one immutable rule – a price must be paid; the teacher must be dedicated to the task. It must be his first priority. The sculpting of the lesson is the work of an artist. All teachers can dream of great lessons; it requires love’s labor to make that dream come true. The teacher must constantly keep the lesson seed in his mind, water it, weed it, nourish it, sweat over it until the wording is precise and persuasive, and then get it in his mind (harvest it) for teaching. There are no shortcuts. There are no substitutes. The price must and will be paid. The only question is whether the teacher will pay it in preparation or the class will pay it in listening.

Lesson preparation is the teacher’s first priority. He has no higher duty. It is the air he breathes, the food upon his table, the life-blood in his

veins. Great teaching is the result of great study.¹ Success in teaching is no different from success in any area – ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. Great football coaches may owe some success to the inspiration of game day, but if there is no game plan, no discipline, or no execution of the game plan, then there is only a group of inspired losers. As many a fired coach will testify, adrenaline provides inspiration, not illumination.

If a teacher teaches 30 persons on a given Sunday morning for 45 minutes, he occupies $22^{1/2}$ person-hours of time. That is 3 8-hour workdays. What right does any teacher have to step into the classroom and consume such time without adequate preparation? An unprepared teacher steals time. It is no wonder that Paul exhorted young Timothy that he must “give diligence” (“study,” KJV) in order to be a workman who did not need to be ashamed. Certainly teachers will more easily find preparation time in some weeks than in others. Some weeks the lesson will almost leap into the mind without the intermediation of long hours of study. Such serendipities will be more than balanced by the occasions when the river of originality turns into a desert. The late Carroll Ellis, who was chairman of the speech department at David Lipscomb University and an outstanding teacher, once said that the

¹ Great study does not guarantee success, but the absence of great study guarantees failure.

preacher ought to be permitted to get in the pulpit on occasion and say, “Brethren, this morning I have nothing to say.” Probably every teacher has felt that way. If he has not adequately prepared, he says the same thing in different words. It just takes him longer.

WHEN DOES LESSON PREPARATION BEGIN?

In giving the limited commission, Jesus told his disciples that they did not need to “take thought” about what they would say when they were delivered up because he would give it to them in that hour. Given the agonizing hours that teachers spend just in determining the subject upon which they shall teach, not to mention the additional hours in developing that subject, being “delivered up” may seem a small price to pay for receiving lessons without having to “take thought.” Could it be that, for many, preparation is made more difficult than it should be because it starts too late?

Lesson preparation begins long before that moment when the teacher retires to his study to put pen to paper. The teacher who does not understand this will find that time spent in the study is a dreadful and depressing experience. Lesson preparation begins with the teacher’s heart – how he lives; involves the teacher’s ears – how he listens; and considers the teacher’s class – how he loves.

Preparation begins with the life of the teacher. That which comes from the teacher's heart is more apt to go to the hearer's heart. The teacher cannot share what he does not possess; he cannot reveal what he has not seen. Lives cannot be changed by eloquent hearsay. Isaiah was a great preacher and teacher because his eyes had seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. (Isaiah 6:5.) The apostles were great preachers and teachers because they preached that which they had seen and heard. (1 John 1:1-3.) Their preaching was not a theoretical dictum but a declaration; it was not an argument but an announcement; it was not propaganda but an infecting contagious proclamation that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

Once the teacher has the fire of God burning within him, it is time to listen to the sounds of life. Understand people; understand what is happening in the world; understand the circumstances in which people find themselves; understand the relation of God's Word to both the people and the world. Like a mighty Colossus, with one foot in God's Word and the other in God's World, the teacher brings the Word of God to bear upon the needs of man. Finally, before a teacher puts pen to paper, he needs to love his hearers. He needs to place himself in their place. He needs to stand in an empty classroom, see the folks who will be there Sunday, and ask what will help them in their struggles. Can the teacher who honestly loves his hearers really

conclude that they will be helped by a debate over the authorship of some Biblical book, a browbeating about the teacher's pet peeve, or a lecture on the technicalities of the Greek or Hebrew? Can the teacher who honestly loves his hearers really conclude that they will be helped by doctrine without application? The apostle Paul never taught doctrine without applying it.

The efficacy of teaching diminishes in relationship to the size of the "great gulf fixed" between the teacher and the taught. According to one poll, common complaints about lessons from hearers were: 1) too many complex ideas; 2) too much analysis and too little answers; 3) too formal and too impersonal; 4) too much theological jargon; 5) too propositional and too few illustrations; and 6) too many lessons reach a dead end and give no guidance to commitment and action. These are problems that can't be solved without preparation prior to retiring to the study.

Too many teachers get into the classroom and begin to spout esoteric (antonym, straightforward) material. Then the bell rings and it is over. But real teaching does not work this way. Real teaching grows out of the counseling session, the elders' or deacons' meeting, the visitation call, the casual encounter in a restaurant or a grocery store. It speaks of and to what the teacher has learned in all of his dealings with the people during the week.

It relates the gospel to human situations and works back and forth between them like a weaver's shuttle.

Teaching that does not do this is not true teaching. It has not understood the nature of the gospel. The gospel addresses and assumes the forms of real people's lives or it does not exist at all. It is not theoretical or academic; it is blood and bone, gut and marrow. It speaks to human hurts and hopes, to specific needs and possibilities, or it does not speak at all.