

LESSON THIRTEEN – PREPARING TO TEACH

Presenting the Bible Study Lesson, cont'd

1. The posture. Finally, give attention to posture. Face the hearers squarely. Hold your head up with the chin level. Never tilt the head back lest it appear that you are “talking down your nose” to the hearers. Lean slightly toward the hearers. While leaning on the lectern may convey a desire for closeness, leaning too long conveys weakness – the lectern has become a crutch. If you have the luxury of a traveling microphone, occasionally move from behind the lectern to the right or left. This removes a wall from between the teacher and the hearers. Movement should occur during transitional points in the lesson. Avoid making strong points while moving backward because the direction of movement contradicts the point. Too much movement, swaying, or bobbing, however, appears more as eccentricities than as a desire to get close to the hearers.

Don't let concerns about your voice, gestures, or posture turn you into a statue. Strive to be natural. A little practice will help until you feel comfortable. Proper preparation combined with a natural delivery will enable both the teacher and his hearers to look forward to the lesson.

The teacher's work is not finished when the final period terminates the

final sentence of the lesson's preparation. The lesson still must be taught. The lesson's purpose is communication, not exhibition. The teacher's speaking style and language are important only to the extent that they aid in communication. Annoying habits that hinder communication limit the teacher's effectiveness. Communication is a two-way street. The teacher's contribution is speaking; the class's contribution is hearing. Since faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17), hindrances to communication are serious and must be corrected. While the teacher's wife may be a good source from which the teacher can be informed about annoying habits, it is the teacher's duty to examine himself. The hindrances to communication discussed here are to help him get started in that examination. Thinking about them should suggest others. If all else fails, think about annoying habits that you have observed in other teachers that have hindered your ability to listen and to appreciate fully what the teacher had to say.

1. Pompous attitude: Pomposity rarely affects people affirmatively.

One teacher was humorously described as being so pompous that he was able to "strut sitting down." Humility is more becoming to a proclaimer of the spirit of Christ.

2. Length of lesson: While there is no set rule for the length of a lesson, it has been correctly observed that the head cannot absorb

more than the seat can endure. When the lesson lasts too long the hearers will not politely leave, but instead will quietly turn off the teacher. “Going over” may not be a major problem in bible Study where time is always limited and terminated by a loud bell.

However, if poor preparation shortens the good content of the class and lengthens the time devoted to poor content and “filler,” has the class not been robbed of more helpful material that good

preparation could have provided? Winston Churchill once said of one of his speeches that it would have been shorter if he had had more time to prepare. Truthfully, brevity takes time! The teacher who habitually teaches too long may just need to spend more time in preparation. The smart teacher not only knows what to say and how to say it, he knows when to stop.

3. Poor Grammar: Few things are more distracting than incorrect grammar. To those who know proper usage, poor grammar is like scraping a fingernail across a blackboard. It draws attention away from the message to the messenger. It makes one wonder why he should believe what the teacher says about the Greek when that same teacher doesn't even know the rudiments of English. How seriously should hearers take one who has dedicated his life to

teaching, but doesn't take his task seriously enough to learn his own language? While there are reasons for not knowing proper grammar, such as lack of opportunity, it is inexcusable for a teacher to remain that way without making an effort to improve.

4. Poor voice and poor use of voice: It is not true that the teacher cannot improve his voice. If you live in a city with a university or a community college, sign up for voice training. More often, it is not the voice itself but the use of the voice that hinders communication. Some are monotone – they use the same monotonous tone whether they are speaking of the betrayal or the crucifixion. The voice never rises; it never falls. Why should hearers listen if the speaker appears to be so bored with the message that there is no emotion in his voice. Some are mumblers – they run their words together or enunciate so poorly that they can hardly be understood. The first thing said about Jesus when he preached the sermon on the mount was that “he opened his mouth.” Some are yellers – they are convinced that the louder you say it the more it is believed. They scare babies and frighten old men. Somehow they need to learn the difference between lightning and thunder. Some are sing-song – they rise and fall for no apparent

reason. It is not natural. It does not characterize their speech outside of the pulpit. Someone convinced them that teaching lessons requires vocal variety but failed to teach them that inflection and volume should match the message because anything else detracts from it.

For the sake of the hearers and the effectiveness of the teacher it can truly be said, “Think on these things.” While you’re thinking about them, work on eliminating them.

Any person who loves and believes the scripture knows that the message is more important than the method. Why, then, has all of this time and energy been spent on the method? The answer is simple – it doesn’t make much difference what the message is if nobody listens. The teacher who refuses to attend to method cannot truthfully claim that he is interested in proclaiming the message or in the hearers who sit at his feet. Thus, the true teacher strives to avoid hindrances to communication. To the four discussed above, we add the following:

1. Distracting Mannerisms: There are almost as many distracting mannerisms as there are speakers, but some are greater plagues than others. For example, 1) Meaningless filler: Sentences begin

with “ah,” break in the middle with “uh,” and end with “you know,” all appropriately interspersed with throat clearings. It may be the result of a habit that needs to be broken. It may be “filler” while the teacher is thinking or trying to find his place in his notes.

Whatever the cause, it does not communicate anything positive to the hearers. 2) Poor eye contact: Witnesses at trial are told to look jurors in the eye while testifying. People tend to believe those who look them in the eye and to disbelieve those who don't. Teachers who look above the hearers' heads or at the walls cannot communicate effectively. They cannot observe their hearers, which enable the teacher to know when hearers are puzzled and need more explanation, when they are touched and thus are open to persuasion for right action, and when they are not listening and action must be taken to bring their attention back to the lesson.

3) Inappropriate gestures: Poor coordination between words and gestures confuses the hearers. Some teachers want to smile all of the time. While everybody likes a smile, smiles are not appropriate while speaking of judgment to come or eternal punishment.

2. Improper preparation: Improper presentation and too little

preparation are not necessarily the same thing. It can take longer to wrongly prepare a lesson than to prepare it correctly. Lessons must not be technical, fuzzy, or academic. The homiletical ship cannot float in such waters. The teacher must take the time to simplify his language and to select words that appeal to the hearers. Not only should unnecessary points and sentences be eliminated, unnecessary words must go as well. Extra words in a lesson are like extra parts in a machine – they get in the way of its operation.

3. Use of clichés: Is there anyone who cannot fill in the last word of “Keep up with the _” or “at the end of his _”? The use of worn out, hackneyed phrases, which generally results from shortcutting preparation, wears out the hearers. Old, old clichés hinder the proclamation of the old, old story.
4. Insensitivity to hearers: As a teacher, you should ask how your hearers think and feel? Teachers often assume that their hearers are just like them. That is probably not a valid assumption for any number of reasons. Suffice to say that people are like snowflakes – no two are exactly alike. How can the teacher who does not consider his hearers’ circumstances expect to communicate with them. He is apt to begin a lesson at a prison by saying, “I am glad

you all are here.” When he speaks to a group of youth he is more apt to speak of Bach or Beethoven than Garth Brooks. Also, a teacher with an adversarial spirit is insensitive to his hearers. It is well established that an adversarial spirit generates an adversarial response. The teacher’s hearers are not his adversaries, they are his opportunities.

5. Too much repetition: While emphasis can be accomplished by repetition, not everything in the lesson needs to be emphasized. There is no need to emphasize the obvious, clarify the simple, or illustrate the apparent. “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them” is not only a gross over-simplification of lesson organization, if literally applied it is a lesson killer.

While these hindrances to communication are only illustrative and not exhaustive, they should enable the teacher to examine himself both as to these as well as others. Eliminating hindrances to communication will enable the teacher to be a more effective proclaimer of the gospel and a greater servant of the Master.

IN CONCLUSION

“In conclusion” is often a lesson’s most welcome phrase. It is now time to use it in this series on teaching. Preparing the lessons has been a challenge, an opportunity, and a privilege all rolled into one. As one who has moved from full-time preaching to the pew and from always teaching Bible Study to more often sitting in a classroom, I am more sensitive to the hearers’ position and needs as they are called upon to participate in worship and in class by actively engaging with the gospel as it flows from the mind and mouth of another. They need help. Hearers are not insensitive. As a general rule they are generous in overlooking the faults and forgiving the mistakes of those who week after week and class after class must generate material that will make people want to be more like Jesus. Patience is their greatest virtue.

But they have a right to expect the teacher’s best. If they ever come to believe that the teacher is not doing his best, the teacher should seek a new beginning and resolve to do better. These lessons have been prepared to enable the teacher to more effectively communicate the greatest story ever told.

After all, the teacher is a part of the lesson. As Philip Brooks said, “Teaching is the communication of the gospel by man to man.” Man cannot change the gospel. He dare not teach or proclaim any other. What man can do is be certain that he does nothing that detracts from the story of the cross. These lessons have been prepared with the assumption that this is the desire of every person who is engaged in the foolishness of teaching. In my life I have learned that, for the most part, this assumption is valid. But there are a few who believe that they do not need improvement, who will not heed any suggestions that just might help them improve, and who resent any suggestion that improvement is needed. Such teachers do themselves, their hearers, and their Lord a disservice. They would do the kingdom better service by concentrating on their day job. But as long as the teacher is trying to improve, there is hope. It is only when he quits trying and caring that he is not deserving of his hearers’ patience and understanding. It is my prayer that these lessons have provided blueprint, tools, and materials to assist those who are giving themselves to God in their teaching and to their classes in making every effort to become the best teachers that they can be.

To God be the glory!