

TEACH YOURSELF FIRST

Who is your first student? Is it the one who always arrives early? Teacher, your first student is you – yourself. One of the most valuable principles of Christian education I have gleaned from Scripture is this: Teach yourself first.

I have found no truth ever comes across as clearly to my class as that which God has first burned into my heart to the point it has changed my own life. While it is not appropriate to share every struggle of our lives, the trials we have faced are often relevant to our students – even children. The moments my students have been quietest and most attentive are when I have shared what God has been teaching me. Far from thinking less of me, my students' esteem has grown with my willingness to be honest.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19). Jesus taught that observing God's commandments and teaching others to do the same are inseparable. Ultimately our students will do not what we say but what they see us do. A teacher's example is his most powerful lesson.

Consider, for example, teachers who teach the importance of gathering together for prayer, but who rarely attend prayer meeting themselves. If the students accept their teachers' words, they may decide to “try out” prayer meeting. After they attend several times and their teachers are not there, will they continue to take seriously what they have heard those teachers say?

Paul was aware that those he taught were following his example. We know from his writing that he struggled with sin (Romans 7). Yet he confessed his failures and lived his life in such a way that he could beg those under his teaching to follow his example. “Wherefore I beseech you,” he said, “be ye followers of me” (I Corinthians 4:16). Paul sought to follow Christ, and so he could confidently urge others to follow him – as he followed Christ.

James also understood the necessity of teachers teaching themselves first. He speaks about the stricter judgment that awaits teachers because of their great influence on others (James 3:1). God is looking carefully at the lives of teachers, and others are following us.

How can we meet God's inspection with confidence? First, we must look at our own lives. In preparing each lesson we can ask God what the principles mean for us before we ask what they mean for our students.

Second, we can ask God for more humility. We can admit we are still learning to conform our lives to God's plan for us.

So your first pupil should be you, teacher. In your preparation, teach yourself first. Then you will go on to teach your students more effectively.