

Title: The Character of a Teacher
Text: Various
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
Date: 25 September, 2011

Last week Ralph kicked off a new series Weapons of our Warfare. For the next couple of months we are exploring spiritual gifts – what they are, how we can grow in them and how we should use them. This week we jump into looking at the specific spiritual gifts that the bible highlights. There are three passages in the bible that name spiritual gifts – one in Ephesians, another in the first letter of the Corinthians and another in Romans. Here is part of the Romans passage. Paul says:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach.
(Romans 12:6-7)

Tonight we are going to focus on the spiritual gift of teaching.

It is no overstatement to say that the Christian Faith is a faith that is taught.

Jesus was a teacher. He was addressed by his followers as Rabbi – which is an honored teacher in the Jewish faith. For three years Jesus taught thousands of people and twelve people in particular about the kingdom of God. People traveled for days to hear his teaching, because, the bible says, he taught as one who had authority.

After his death and resurrection and before he ascended to heaven, Jesus instructed his students that they in turn should become teachers:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
(Matthew 28:19-20)

Days later the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples with incredibly power. The first ministry the disciples offered was teaching. Peter preached a sermon and 3000 people came to faith and the church exploded with growth. Luke records the rhythm of the early Christian believers:

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
(Acts 2:42)

The early church was built on the apostles teaching which in turn was built on the teaching of Jesus. Without the spiritual gift of teaching exercised by people like Peter, Paul, James, Barnabas, Apollos and Lydia, the early church would not have survived, let alone thrived. And what was true then is certainly true today. The church's foundation is the person, work and teaching of Jesus. If the church is like a boat afloat on a stormy sea, without biblical teaching, the church will be tossed about by every fad and fashion and risk capsizing.

If gift of teaching is so important, what is it? Here is my attempt to define the spiritual gift of teaching:

Teaching is communicating God's word to God's people in God's power for God's glory.

God's Word:

The Christian curriculum is God's Word – the bible. There is no other text book – just the 66 books that make up this library. We have thousands of other books to understand this Book – but this and this alone is our teaching curriculum.

God's People:

The classroom is the church – teaching is for the purpose of building up the saints in faith. Teaching happens when a preacher preaches, when a small group leader leads, when a leader mentors and when a writer blogs.

God's Power:

The qualification to teach is not based on any skill or aptitude, but on whether God has gifted us by the Holy Spirit to teach. No Holy Spirit and there is no power, just words. They might be clever words, eloquent words - beautiful words even. But unless those words come from the mouth of a spirit-filled, God-obsessed teacher they will be empty of any transforming power. Before the Holy Spirit fell on him Peter was just a loud mouth extrovert. But afterwards, he was a Jesus-obsessed evangelist who with others and in the Spirit's power turned the world upside down.

God's Glory:

The ultimate object of teaching is not to become smarter but to give God glory as we love God with all our hearts, souls, MINDS and strength. Teaching enables us to model our lives on Jesus. We glorify God as we become more like His son.

God knows the church needs more spirit-filled and gifted teachers. Newlife will need dozens more over the next ten years as we continue to plant churches. My hope and expectation is that God is calling a number of you to preach and teach. If this is the case, how do you know if God has gifted you to be a teacher?

There are some obvious things I could say at this point about the skills of a teacher – the ability to construct an argument, to communicate persuasively and so on. But I don't want to talk about the skills of a teacher. I want to focus on the character of a teacher. I think there are four really important questions, the answers to which will indicate if God is forming in you the character necessary to be a teacher. The first thing you need to ask is this:

Do you fear God?

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
(Proverbs 1:7)

Fearing God is a sensitive and important issue. We don't fear God because God is some brutal tyrant. The Bible affirms again and again that God is Love.

We fear God because unlike us, God is holy and perfect. We fear God because God is omniscient – all seeing, omnipresent – present everywhere, omnipotent – powerful beyond our imagining. Scott McKnight puts it this way:

This fear is neither dread nor anxiety; rather it is the healthy response of a human being before an altogether different kind of being.
(McKnight)

As the French philosopher Voltaire once said that while God created humankind in His image, we have returned the compliment.

God is not our buddy. God is not our cosmic butler, there to serve us when we call. God is not our divine therapist. God is not a heavenly Santa Clause ready to dish out presents to good boys and girls.

God is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is Jehovah, Yahweh - the LORD. He is a Living Word, a rushing Wind and a consuming fire.

The healthy reverent fear of God arises when we realize that God is all together different t us, when we realize that whatever we think or do is subject of the scrutiny of God's penetrating holiness and love.

Proverbs says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Without God-breathed wisdom a teacher has nothing useful to teach. And without reverent and healthy fear we have no wisdom.

Let me put it this way; you will know that God is forming the character of a teacher in you when you feel a consistent sense of inadequacy when God gives you the opportunity to lead and teach his people – when you feel the incredible weight of responsibility when you prepare to teach.

The fear of God leads to sense of inadequacy apart from God. And inadequate apart from God is exactly how you should feel when you open up this book and teach God's people from it.

Let me give you an example from the bible. Moses saw the holiness of God in a burning bush that was not consumed. He took off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. God called him to speak his word of liberation to the people enslaved in Egypt and Moses comes up with one excuse after another as to why he can't. Moses knew that he was inadequate for the task – he lacked any eloquence. He was hopeless at speaking in public. After hearing his excuses, this is what God said to Moses, and all those whom he calls to teach his people:

The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and teach you what to say.
(Exodus 4:11-12)

The church needs more barefoot teachers; teacher who know every time they open this book and look to teach its meaning to God's people they stand on holy ground. The church needs barefoot preachers who know that apart from God and his power they are completely inadequate for the task. When we are weak, then God's power and strength manifest itself.

The second question of character of a teacher is this:

Are you prepared to be saturated in the Word of God?

A teacher teaches God's word, which is found in the sixty-six books of the bible. If our teaching is to have any power and effect it will be based exclusively on what is written here. In Psalm 1 we read:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.
(Psalm 1:1-3)

The word translated as mediate is the Hebrew word 'hagah', which literally means to roar, growl or groan.

The prophet Isaiah uses hagah when he speaks of a lion growling over its prey. The psalmist is saying we are blessed when we chew on God's word like a lion chews on its prey.

The fifth member of our family is Corker the one-eyed-wonder dog. Corker loves bones. He can make a bone last for days. He takes a bone and licks and chews it and buries it and digs it up and licks it and chews it and buries it and.... He savors every last morsel that bone has to offer.

The psalmist is saying that is what we should do with God's word. We should chew on it, growl over it, wrestle with it until it gives up every last spiritual morsel – and even then we will go back again, because there is even more to discover!

When we mediate on God's word in this way we will be like a tree planted by streams of water and we will yield fruit. My teaching will only yield any fruit if my life has its roots down into God's word.

Let me use another metaphor. The days are warming up and BBQ season is with us. I love BBQ's. And apologies to any vegetarians or vegans here tonight, but I love my red meat. When we have BBQ I love marinated meat – meat that has soaked in sauce and spices for days, allowing the flavor to seep into every part. The best BBQ's serve marinated meat.

The best sermons come from teachers who have marinated their lives in God's word so that when they speak all the flavors of God's truth comes out in what they say.

If God is calling you to teach then chew and chew and chew on this. If God is calling you to teach, marinate your life in this, saturate your life with this.

One of the iconic trees of Australia is the River Red gum. It is found along the banks and wetlands of river systems like the Murray-Darling. The river red gum survives in some of the most arid conditions in Australia because it clings to rivers that regularly flow and flood. In recent years we have had such a severe and record breaking drought in Australia that River Red gums hundreds of years old that have survived many droughts before have died. Trees need water to flourish and grow.

The person who puts their roots down into the word of God is like a River Red gum planted by streams of water. Like a tree on a flood plain, that person will flourish.

Here is a question for you; is your life like this tree?

Or is it like this one?

Is your life spiritually dry, does it lack life?

Put your roots down into God's word and I promise you this, God promises you this – you will yield fruit, you will flourish again, you will prosper.

This leads me to the next question of character for anyone who wants to exercise the spiritual gift of teaching:

Will you do all you can to obey the Word of God?

Saul was the first king of Israel. He was God's anointed leader over Israel. It all started well and under his leadership Israel had a number of military victories. One of those victories was over the Amelekites. Through the prophet Samuel God instructed Saul not take any plunder after defeating the Amelekites – to destroy everything.

Saul leads Israel to complete victory over the Amelekites, but instead of obeying God, Saul ignores God's word and the Israelites kept the best Amelekite cattle and sheep as plunder. God sees all this and is grieved by Saul's disobedience. The prophet Samuel challenged Saul and Saul responds defensively by saying God should be pleased because he had kept the best sheep and cattle as sacrifices for God. But Samuel responds with a devastating rebuke:

Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of lambs.

(1 Samuel 15:22)

Saul thought he could ignore the word of God as long as he did great things for God. It is a deadly assumption.

God does not want our great sacrificial acts – they won't impress him. Any sacrifice we offer to God is infinitely small by comparison with the sacrifice God made for us on the Cross. God doesn't want or need our sacrifices; he wants our humble obedience.

God wants us to be the people of God before we do the work of God.

God's word was constantly being spoken into Saul's life through the prophet Samuel. But along the way through little compromises and justifications Saul ignored God.

God's word is constantly being spoken into our life through the words of this book and the ministry of those who teach us. And yet, like Saul, with little compromises and clever justifications we ignore God and then wonder why God seems so distant from us.

To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

I love 12two. I love the fact you tolerate old people like me hanging out with you on a Sunday night. I love your passion to make a difference in our world, to be faith-filled activists. But I wonder if you could indulge me in offering a little advice.

Before you can change the world, God needs to change you. God needs to renew your minds. God changes us as our will learns to obey the will of God.

Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish nobleman and activist. He prayed this very famous prayer:

Teach us, Lord, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for any reward *save that of knowing that we do your will.*
(Ignatius Loyola)

This leads me to my last question of character for those who God equips to teach:

Will you receive correction from God?

Let's go back to where we started. Proverbs says:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.
(Proverbs 1:7)

If we are to have anything worth teaching we will need wisdom. Wisdom comes as we hear, respond, obey and are corrected by the word of God.

Followers of Jesus are called disciples. A disciple is someone who follows and obeys Jesus. A disciple goes where Jesus goes, does what Jesus does and speaks what Jesus says. A disciple gives authority for Jesus to speak into their life. Sometimes Jesus will speak words of encouragement into our life and other times, through his word, Jesus will speak a word of correction. If you read the gospels you will see that Jesus was constantly bringing loving correction to his disciples – helping them to discover truth that would set them free.

If we say we are followers of Jesus we will open our lives to God's correction and discipline. Henri Nouwen put it this way:

Discipline is the other side of discipleship.
(Henri Nouwen)

When we say Jesus is our Lord we are giving him permission to speak into and correct our lives of all that dishonors him. A disciple gives Jesus authority to correct and discipline.

Who likes discipline? I don't! No one does really. But if we are to grow and especially if we are to have the awesome privilege and responsibility to teach God's people we must be open to Godly correction. Only truth, even hard to hear truth, sets us free.

Sadly we have become very adept at avoiding the truth. The church, tragically, can be a truth avoidance zone. But when loving truth telling is absent there can be tragic consequences. John Ortberg gives us some fantastic illustrations:

Imagine picking your car up from the garage after a routine tune-up, and the mechanic says, "This car is in great shape. Clearly you have an automotive genius to take great care of your car." Later that day, your brakes don't work. You find out you were out of brake fluid. You could have died.

You go back to the shop, and you say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The technician replies, "Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus, to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say, "I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost! When it comes to my car, I want the truth."

Or imagine going to the doctor's office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, "You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated." Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. You find out later your arteries were so clogged that you were one doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The doctor says, "Well, I knew your body is in worse shape than a Jenny Craig before photo, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say to the doctor, "When it comes to my body, I want the truth!"

Obviously, when something matters to us, we do not want illusory comfort based on pain avoidance. We want truth.

Only truth, even the hard truth, can set us free.

Let me be clear, God loves us just as we are. We could leave it at that. But that is only part of the story. God loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us where we are! God wants us to be transformed by His truth.

Teachers are God's truth-tellers. If they are to be truth-tellers they will first need to be truth-hearers.

The title of this series is Weapons of our Warfare. We are engaged in a spiritual battle. Good battles with evil; God wages war on Satan and we are soldiers in this battle. Someone once said that the first victim of war is the truth. If we are to triumph in the battle we are enlisted in we must seek after and tell the truth above all else.

Do you fear God?

Are you ready to be immersed in the word of God?

Are you prepared to obey the word of God?

Will you receive correction from God?

If you are able to answer each of these questions with more of a yes than a no, then God may well be forming in you the character of someone who he will gift as a teacher.

Right at the end of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about the armor that we are to put on before we enter into spiritual battle. He talks about the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness and the belt of truth and the helmet of salvation. The really interesting thing is that the only offensive weapon he mentions is what he calls the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The word that is translated as sword is the Greek word machira. A machira was the short sword used by Roman soldiers in hand to hand combat where fighting was at its dirtiest and deadliest.

When we teach God's word we pick up the sword of the Spirit and we take the attack to the enemy. We are in battle of life and death – the battle for people's eternal destinies, the battle for justice and righteousness. To teach is a high and holy calling. We will only teach in the power of the Holy Spirit as we fear God, immerse ourselves in the word of God, obey the word of God and in turn are ready to be corrected by God.

My prayer is that many of you will take up the sword of the Spirit and teach God's word to God's people in God's power for God's glory!