

# The Devotional Life of the Sunday School Teacher

by J.R. Miller

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*J.R. Miller's sermon highlights the critical role of a Sunday School teacher's spiritual life and love for Christ in effectively nurturing and guiding children in their faith.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 19:14, John 21:15

**Topics:** "Spiritual Responsibility", "Teaching with Love"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the vital role of a Sunday School teacher's spiritual life in effectively guiding children in their faith. He highlights that teaching is not merely about methods or knowledge, but about embodying Christ's love and character, as teachers represent Him to their students. Miller stresses the importance of preparation, both spiritually and academically, and the necessity of a genuine love for Christ and for the children being taught. He warns that the responsibility of shaping young lives is profound, and teachers must be diligent in their own spiritual growth to positively influence their students.

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## Transcript

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by J. R. Miller (1840-1912)

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The real power in Sunday School teaching is not methods, important as it is to have the best of these; nor in equipment, valuable as this is--but in the teacher's own spiritual life. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," is the divine revealing of the secret of power in all Christian work.

It is the aim of these simple chapters to put emphasis upon some of the vital elements in the Sunday School teacher's life and work.

## Chapter 1

### Sacredness of the Teacher's Work

One of the most significant words in the teaching of Jesus, is that in which he gives his command concerning the care of the children. He asked Peter a question, "Do you love me?" and when he got a satisfactory answer, he said to him, "Feed my lambs."

He had in mind the figure of a shepherd. David had sung, "The Lord is my shepherd." Jesus himself had used the figure to describe his own tender watchfulness over his people. They are his sheep. The children are the lambs. The word used here means, "little lambs." This suggests that the very youngest children are included. They were infants that were once brought to Jesus, whom the disciples would have kept away, but whom he welcomed so warmly, saying "Allow the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not." No mother of an infant child should ever feel that the Son of God is too great to care for her baby, to receive it into his arms and to bless it.

An interesting story is told of Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary. Once when throngs were coming to him and he was almost utterly exhausted, he said to his servant: "I must sleep, or I shall die. No matter who comes, do not wake me." Then he crept into his tent and his faithful attendant stood guard. Presently the young man saw his master's pale face at the tent door. Beckoning to him, Xavier said, as if frightened: "I made a mistake! I made a mistake! If a little child comes, waken me." It is thus with our Master. When a little child needs him he is always ready to answer the call.

No flock of lambs in any wilderness is beset by so many perils as are the children in this world. It is the duty of the Church to protect them. The mother is the child's first natural keeper. Every home should be a sanctuary, where the little ones born into it shall be safe. We are careful about health and bodily safety. We make our homes secure shelters from the elements. We look after drainage, ventilation and warmth. We are careful about food, water and clothes. Are we as careful about the moral shelter which we provide in our homes?

Protection is not all. The lambs must be fed -- not their bodies only, but their minds and their spiritual natures as well. Every home should provide for the best possible education of the children who come into it. The mother is the child's first teacher; her heart is the child's first schoolroom. The children should be taught early to look up to God, to trust him, to love and obey him. If they are Christ's lambs they should be trained from infancy to know their good Shepherd, to listen for his voice and to follow him.

The parents come first, but the teacher's part is also of the greatest importance in the shepherding of Christ's lambs. The Sunday school is the Church caring for the children. Very sacred are its functions. It

obligations cannot be met by any mere perfunctory or routine service. In the Jewish church the most urgent commands were given concerning the training of the children. They were to be instructed from their infancy in the Holy Scriptures. These heavenly words were to be lodged in their hearts so early and so deeply that they would color their first thoughts, sweeten their first affections and give tone to all their aspirations and desires.

This is what we as teachers should seek to do for the young children in our classes. We should fill their hearts and minds with divine influences -- the words which are able to make them wise unto salvation. We have the children when their lives are easily impressed, and when the blessing of our teaching will help to shape them for noble character and great usefulness. We should use the utmost diligence to take possession of them then for God.

Jesus made very clear the essential qualifications of a true shepherd. Before he committed his little lambs to the care of Peter, he asked him in a most solemn way, "Do you love me?" and got his answer, "Yes, Lord." There must be in the heart love for Christ, to make the apostle ready to be a shepherd of Christ's lambs. There was special reason why the question should be pressed at this time. Peter had sinned -- he had said in his weakness that he was not one of the Master's friends. He must unsay that denial and assert his love for Christ in a most unmistakable way, before he could be entrusted with the care of souls -- little children's souls.

It is well that all who are set to care for children should understand the full significance of this requirement. Love for the work itself is not enough. There are some people who like to teach children, but this is not a sufficient qualification. Enthusiasm for children does not alone fit one for the sacred work. The children are Christ's especial care, and he will not entrust them to anyone who is not loyal to him, and who does not know him and love him.

He does not say that the shepherds must be very learned, or very wise, or highly cultured--but he does insist that they must love him. It is his work -- caring for the children, and no one who does not feel toward them as Jesus himself does, is ready to do the right work for them and in them. The lambs are tender and easily harmed. An ungentle touch would hurt them. An unkind word might mar the beauty of their spirit. Wrong advice might wreck their destiny.

It is evident that nothing but love, will fit one to be a shepherd of Christ's lambs. Imagine a mother without affection. A little child is laid in her arms, but she does not love it. She undertakes the care of it in a perfunctory way, nursing it, providing for it, teaching and training it, yet all without love. Think of that tender young life growing up in this world of danger, without the nurture of love! It might almost as well be in an orphanage, as with an unloving mother.

But even the best human love, the deepest, purest, and most sacred of human affections, is not enough to prepare one to be a shepherd of the lambs. The love of Christ must be in the heart of one who would fittingly do this holy work. Unless a woman loves Christ -- however she may love her child -- she is not ready to be a true mother of little children who belong to Christ. The teacher who does not love Christ, however naturally affectionate and sympathetic she may be, lacks the essential qualification for being a true shepherd of Christ's little lambs.

Why is the love of Christ necessary for this shepherding? Nothing else in this world is so sensitive as a child's soul. A rough or careless touch may leave eternal marring on it. You go out one day with a geologist, and he shows you on certain rocks the prints of birds' feet, the indentations made by falling

raindrops, the impression of a leaf with all its fine veinage marked. Once that rock was plastic clay, and the birds walked over it, the rain fell on it, and the leaf fluttered down and lay there. Next day the clay became dry and hardened, holding in it all these impressions. At length it became rock. Then some mighty upheaval tossed it to the side of a great mountain, where the man of science found it. But through all the long centuries, and in fire and flood, it has kept these ancient marks to tell the story of its origin.

Yet more sensitive to impressions than the plastic clay and holding them yet more tenaciously, is the life of a little child. Every phase of influence that passes over it, even momentarily, leaves its own record indelibly written. If we who are caring for the gentle life are impatient, the impatience will leave its trace; if we grow angry, our anger will make a wound; if our life is impure, it will leave tarnishing. They must be holy, pure and meek--who would do Christ's work worthily on the soul of a little child. Nothing but the love of Christ in a heart will make it truly fit for the shepherding of Christ's lambs.

This wonderful love transforms the life in which it dwells. It makes the heart warm and tender; it makes one patient, thoughtful, kindly and sympathetic; it softens harshness and crudeness into gentleness; it gives one mercy and compassion toward the erring; it kindles that higher love which seeks the higher good of a life. When one loves Christ truly, one has some measure of Christ's own love, and is thus prepared to be as Christ to others.

We need to think seriously of the responsibility of taking a young life into our care for teaching and influence. There is a responsibility in all friendship. We are flattered when people come to us and wish to have us for friends. Confidence and love bring us pleasure. But what are you going to do with this new friend who has come into your life? What kind of guardianship are you going to exercise over him? Are you good enough to take him under your influence?

One of Charles Lamb's letters gives a most interesting illustration of unusual thoughtfulness in this line. A young person was disposed to trust him as a friend, giving him his confidence. Mr. Lamb wrote to this person and said: "I do not wish to deter you from making a friend, a true friend, and such friendship, where the parties are not blind to each other's faults, is very useful and valuable. I perceive a tendency in you to this error. I know that you have chosen to take up a high opinion of my moral worth, but, I say it before God, and I do not lie, -- you are mistaken in me. I could not bear to lay open all my failings to you, for my shame would be too pungent."

That was a brave and noble thing to do. Not many men would have done it. Yet the responsibility of accepting a new friend, especially when it is a child or a young person, is always most serious. If our hands are not clean, if our hearts are not pure, if we are not ready to be absolutely true to the person, we dare not do it. Nothing but the love of Christ in the heart, fits one to receive another life into the confidence and affection of holy friendship. It is a serious thing to take a class of children or young people, becoming their teacher; and if one has not the mind of the Master, one dare not do it. Before he entrusts his lambs for shepherding to any human care, Jesus asks with searching earnestness, "Do you love me?" Then getting the answer, "Yes, Lord: you know that I love you," he says, "Feed my lambs."

When we love Christ truly, we are ready for any service he may give us, however sacred it may be. Then we can take the tender young life into our hands, and our touch will not harm it. Then we can answer the children's questions; for one who lives near the heart of Christ is taught of him, and can guide his little ones into the truth. Then the love of Christ, burning in us, will make us like Christ; and just as we become like him are we ready to shepherd his little lambs.

## Chapter 2

### The Teacher's Aim

The highest work given to mortals is that of winning souls. It is the work which Christ himself came into the world to do. His part was to reveal the love of God and then make redemption for lost men; the winning and gathering of perishing ones--he committed to his disciples. In ordinary cases lost sinners are brought to repentance and faith, only through those who already believe. There is only one Savior, but human messengers must tell the story of his grace and bring men to him.

Christ does not go along the paths of life; seeking the lost, save in the persons of his disciples. The Holy Spirit does not, at least ordinarily, convict men of sin and lead them in penitence to the cross, by his immediate agency, but through the inspired Word, as spoken by cleansed human lips.

When we think of these truths, we see our great responsibility as Christians. Our mission in this world is to carry Christ to those who do not know him. This is especially true of all whom as preachers and teachers are sent to present the gospel to others. They have a peculiar responsibility in this work. The Sunday school teacher in whose heart there is not a strong desire to win souls, has not yet realized the seriousness of the relation which he sustains to the members of his class. Those who sit before others with the Bible in their hands, to guide them into knowledge of the truth, should make sure that they know their duty. The Holy Spirit desires through them to present Christ as Savior and Lord. There are those who may never be saved unless it be through us; if we fail in our duty to them they may perish, and their blood will be upon us.

We have an illustration of the human part of salvation in our Lord's miracle of the loaves. The bread came from the Master's hands. The disciples themselves never could have fed the thousands with the little they happened to have. Yet neither did Jesus feed the multitude, except through his disciples. He gave the bread to them and they distributed it among the hungry ones who sat there on the green banks. The Master and his disciples were co-workers.

In this we see a picture of the manner in which the blessings of redemption reach lost men. Christ alone can prepare these blessings; no other one in the world could do this. He gave his own life to be bread for the hungry world. No other one can provide bread for our souls. Yet he does not with his own hands carry the bread to the perishing and hungry. He gives the loaves to his disciples--and they pass them to the people.

But suppose those twelve men who were the mediators of the blessing of the bread that day had taken the loaves from the Master's hands, and, sitting down on the grass, had merely fed themselves, eating until they were satisfied, then laying down the bread, and not passing it to the hungry multitude waiting beyond them, what would have been the result? While there was bread enough to feed all the thousands, they would have remained unfed, because of the indolence and the selfishness of the disciples. The Master would have been balked in his purpose of mercy and compassion toward the people, not through any lack of power in himself or of provision ready, but because his disciples had failed in their mission as distributors of the blessings which his hands had prepared.

The disciples did not act thus that day, however. Gladly and eagerly they carried the bread from group to group, until all the multitude was fed. But in the spiritual counterpart to that feeding, do the Lord's disciples never merely feed themselves, taking no thought for the hungry ones who are beyond them? They sit

down at the gospel feast table and eat of the provisions that are offered, but do not think of the souls outside, who are perishing of hunger.

It is easy to see what terrible consequences may result from this neglect of duty. Souls may perish in their sins because we, in our thoughtlessness or in our spirit of self-indulgence, will not do our part by simply passing to them the bread of life. If we act thus we cannot say as Paul said, referring to the lost: "I am pure from the blood of all men."

It should always be a question with us, when we are interceding for others, asking blessing or help of any kind for them, whether it may not be our duty to take to them what we ask God to give them. There are times when to pray for one to be sent to do some work of Christ is less than useless -- is even presumptuous. A city missionary, on his rounds, was passing a miserable hovel and heard cries as of children from within. He knocked but received no answer, the cries still continuing and indicating sore distress. He opened the door and went in, and the spectacle that met his eyes was one to soften to tenderness the hardest heart. On a little heap of straw in one corner of the wretched apartment, lay a woman dead, and to her lifeless body two little children were clinging, weeping bitterly and calling to her. There was no fire and the room was cold.

The missionary was deeply touched by the pitiful sight, and his sympathy went out to the orphan children. He did not know what to do for them, and therefore fell upon his knees and prayed to God. He prayed unadvisedly, however, for he said: "O God, my faith this instant dies, unless your open skies send help to these. Send someone -- some angel, some messengers, to provide for them." But hardly had the words escaped his lips, when there came rebuke in answer to his rash thought. He seemed to hear, as if from the skies, the words: "You are my messenger -- do not dare to leave my little ones. Lo, I have sent you here for the very purpose of caring for them. To your keeping this night I give them!"

So he arose and answered his own prayer. Giving a hand to each child, he led them away to shelter and care. Thus, many times, the only answer to our cries to God for help to others is, "Go--and minister to them in my name. You are my messenger."

When we ask how we may win souls, the answer is, that our part is that only of the messenger of Christ. When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration and the distressed father told him of his demoniac son, and how the disciples had tried in vain to cast out the demon, Jesus said, "Bring him here to me." That is what he asks us always to do with the souls in whose salvation we are interested -- "Bring them to me." That really is all we are to do -- all we can do.

Yet there are some things to notice about the work of the messenger. Not everyone is ready to bring the lost to the Savior. We must be vessels fit for the Master's use--or he will not use us in this most sacred work.

For one thing, we must seek to make lost sinners know that God loves them. This really is the heart of the gospel message. It was to reveal this fact to men in their sins that the Son of God came down from heaven to earth. This is the message that he spoke in the ears of the weary, the lost, wherever he went. This was the gospel which shone out in his incarnate life as he moved about, -- "God--manifested in the flesh." This was the meaning of the cross -- it declared that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to be the world's Redeemer. This is the great burden of the message of the Church to men; it says to every sinner, "God loves you." He who really learns this one truth, whose heart learns it, and who can say in the glow of happy consciousness "God loves me!" is saved. The first thing, therefore, in those who sit

down before others to try to win them, is to make it plain and clear to them that God loves them.

For another thing, there should be in the teacher's own heart a genuine love for souls, a true compassion for the unsaved. Some measure of the love that brought Christ from heaven to earth, and led him to his wonderful condescension and sacrifice, we must have, if we would be his messengers in bringing others to him. If we would be soul winners, we must have the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Until we have in us something of this compassion, it is scarcely worth our while to try to lead souls to the Savior. "God loves you and I love you," was the message of Mr. McAll to the people the Paris, when he first began his work among them. There is little use in our telling people the first part of this message if we cannot tell them also the second part of it. We must love or we cannot tell of God's love. The love of Christ must throb in our hearts, shine in our faces, melt in our eyes, tremble in our words, and offer itself again on the cross in our lives, if we would win souls to heaven.

There is a practical suggestion in the scriptural word: "He who is wise wins souls." Souls cannot be driven to Christ, they cannot be coerced into discipleship; they must be won. When we study the manner of Christ among men, we readily see how he sought to save the lost. He loved people into his kingdom. He proved himself the Friend of sinners. He sought not to be "ministered unto, but to minister." He loved to do good to others, to help them, to comfort them. Grace shone in his face and in his whole life.

If we would bring souls to Christ we must win them. The teacher who is cold in his manner may teach earnestly and evangelically, but he will not gain souls for his Master. It is the teacher that has a warm heart, and whose heart melts into his words and his life, who will be most greatly blessed in his work. We can win others for Christ and save them, only by love.

The first bringing of pupils to Christ is not the whole of the teacher's work. They are then to be watched over with great care, wisely guided, faithfully shepherded, helped in all true ways, built up into strength and led out into fields of active service. To this sacred ministry every teacher is called and ordained. Fulfilling his ministry with faithful earnestness, he will shine as the stars forever and ever.

## Chapter 3

### The Teacher's Preparation

Preparation is more than half; indeed, in many things, it is nearly all. Work for which preparation has not been well made, is scarcely worth while. One, who expects to make anything noble of his chosen calling, prepares for it with great diligence and painstaking. Men serve a long apprenticeship to be ready to do the work of their trade. Inadequate preparation results in incompetent workmanship, and that foredooms one to failure. No man can hope to succeed in business without a business training which will enable him to grapple with the problems of trade. No one can rise to distinction in a profession without laborious study and self discipline. Most of the failures in life may be traced directly to the lack of thorough preparation. Men are in haste to get into the field and do not take time to fit themselves for the responsibilities and duties which await them.

What is true in general of all callings and pursuits, is yet truer of work on mind and heart; most careful preparation should be made for it. Before a man is considered competent to be a physician, to be entrusted with the treatment of diseases and the performance of critical surgical operations, he must undergo a training of years under the best instructors. Can it be any less responsible work to be a physician of souls, -- to be a teacher, for example, of a class of children or young people in a Sunday

school?

We do not realize the criticalness of the work we have to do, when we sit down beside another to talk with him of spiritual things. His eternal destiny may depend on what we say to him in that very lesson. He may be at one of the turning points of his life, at the parting of the ways; and when we have taught our lesson the decision may have been made. It is always most serious work to teach others in spiritual things. We need wise and thorough preparation for it.

It is a fearful thing to do any work carelessly. Careless carpentering may result in insecurity in a building in which men and women are to live; and disaster may result. Careless metal-casting may lead to the putting of a flawed beam into the great bridge, and one night in the darkness a train filled with sleeping passengers is hurled into the waters to perish. Careless plumbing may result in typhoid fever or diphtheria. Carelessness in any kind of work leaves danger behind it. But negligence in spiritual work, in work for souls, may lead to the most far reaching evil consequences. Those who would do the Lord's work need the most careful training for it.

Two kinds of preparation are necessary. One is general, bearing upon the life and character of the teacher and running through many years. This preparation begins with personal devotement to Christ. This must always be first. We must come to Christ, before we can go forth for Christ. We must be Christians, before we are teachers. The Twelve were appointed "that they might be with him," and that, when they were trained, he "might send them forth." We are not ready to be entrusted with the care of the souls--until our own soul is saved and we are following Christ.

Preparation for teaching includes also, personal knowledge of Christ. It is not enough to know about him -- we must know him. Teaching never can be effective which is only a retelling of what some other one has said. That was the weakness of the teaching of the scribes in our Lord's Day. They quoted what the rabbis have said. We must be able to tell what we ourselves know. Personal friendship with Christ is a necessary qualification for one who would be a teacher in the school of Christ.

Another element of preparation, is familiarity with the Scriptures. Of course, the Bible is such a vast treasure house that even a lifetime spent in researches in it cannot exhaust it; hence it cannot be said that one must know all about the Bible before he is prepared to be a teacher. One may begin with very little knowledge and yet be an efficient teacher, but he must be a diligent student of the Word, meanwhile, and all the while.

Another element of preparation in a teacher, is his own heart life. Miss Havergal used to say that a great deal of living must go to a very little writing. It is quite as true that a great deal of living must go to a very little teaching. Really, we can teach only what we have learned by experience. When the minister said he had been thirty years preparing the sermon which he had just delivered with such power, he spoke truly, although, perhaps, the immediate preparation of the discourse had required but a few hours. Thirty years' life, with its experiences, had gone into the sermon. Any sermon or lesson is valuable, just in proportion to the amount of life that has entered into it.

Another element in personal preparation, must be made in the teacher's character. If he is not a godly man, he is not fit to touch the souls of others. He should live so carefully and conscientiously that he will never be afraid to look any man in the face. He needs the preparation of attested character. His neighbors must be able to witness well for him. A doubtful reputation disqualifies one for effective teaching. The good work he may do through his lessons on Sundays, will be neutralized by the influence of his life on week

days.

One of our Lord's most suggestive teachings is against hiding one's light under a bushel. Our spiritual life is a lamp burning in the heart and we are to make our character so crystalline and keep so clean that the shining will never be obscured. Any inconsistency in conduct will dim something of the brightness of the light. Anything that is not Christlike in our behavior or disposition will hinder the full, free shining out of the light within us. A beautiful life is a noble preparation for teaching. Those who sit before classes on Sunday should have white souls and untarnished names.

So much for the teacher's general preparation, the preparation which comes through Christian nurture. This is put first, because it is first in value and importance. One may be a successful teacher without being a great theologian; but one never can leave deep, heavenly impressions on other lives without being godly. One must have clean hands, in order to put touches of beauty on immortal lives.

But there is also a specific and definite preparation which every teacher needs to make. The lesson must be prepared. To a young minister who was in danger of trusting too much to mere glowing ardor to the neglect of painstaking preparation, an old minister wrote, "You are quite right to trust God with your work; but remember that it was beaten incense that was used for the service of the sanctuary." Love for Christ does not preclude the necessity for hard study, either in a minister or in a teacher. Previous to the class work on Sunday, should always be as many hours as the teacher can get during the week for the careful study of the lesson. It is wonderful, too, how much time even the busiest teacher can get by using merely the fragments of time that most people waste. Twenty minutes daily will make two whole hours in a week.

This is not the place to speak of the way to prepare a lesson, further than to say that it must be conscientiously done. No slovenly work will either please God or leave good results in the life and character of a pupil. We are builders. Paul loves to use the word "edify" of those who are engaged in Christian work. In one remarkable passage he speaks of two kinds of building materials which may be used even by good men, working, too, on the true foundation. One may build into the wall, wood, hay and stubble, or gold, silver and costly stones. The illustration is very suggestive, and never was the caution as to what we should build into others' life temples more needed than in these very days. There are countless materials ever close to our hand which we might use, which would be only wood, hay and stubble in the fabric.

It is easy to understand the consequences of carelessness or unfaithfulness in deciding what to give our pupils when we sit before them. To teach falsehood is to build into their lives that which will leave eternal marring. To teach mere trivial things, bits of sentiment, idle fancies, is to build wood, hay and stubble into the wall, amid the gold, silver and precious stones. The illustration suggests the unfitness of such materials in a temple in which every smallest fragment should be rich in its beauty and worth. In preparing our lessons we should take exceeding care that nothing unworthy shall ever be brought to give to the eager spirits that wait for us every Sunday. Nothing but truth is fit to build in the house we are rearing for God.

In all his preparation the teacher should work for the eye of God, never for man's eye. He should do just as carefully and painstakingly the things which only God shall see, as the things which human eyes may see and human lips commend and praise. An English dealer, interviewing Oka, the great modern Japanese carver of ivories, said to him: "Why do you waste your time in carving the under part which is never seen? You could work much quicker and make money far more rapidly if you were to leave that part plain." The

carver answered, "God who gave me skill and taste, can see the under part; I dare not leave it uncarved." That is the spirit in which the work is done in Japan. Small wonder that it excels in the beauty and individuality!

Really all our work is for the eye of God. That which men never will see, God sees. We dare do nothing negligently, for we are doing our most obscure task work for the great Master's eye. Those who are to open God's Word on Sundays, interpreting to a class of children or young people the meaning of a passage of Holy Scriptures, should make most diligent preparation in patient, quiet study, so that they may give no mistaken instruction and that the teaching may be interesting and impressive.

It has been said that the words "That will do" have done more harm than any other sentence in the English language. Too many Sunday school teachers let this motto of easy going indolence rule them in their preparation of their lessons. They fail to realize the serious nature of the work they are set to do. They feel that anything will do for a class of boys or girls, forgetting that these young minds are most impressible and these young hearts open to influences which will shape their whole future. Nothing but the most careful and most thorough preparation the teacher can possibly give to his lesson during the week, is worthy of the sacredness of his work or will satisfy the Master.

There is also a devotional preparation which every teacher should make before going to his class. He should go from the presence of God--to his place of duty. Then his own heart will be set on fire at the flame of God's altar, and, looking into the face of Christ, he will receive his commission for the work before him. Laying all his preparation at the Master's feet, the blessing of the Holy Spirit will come upon it, and he will be a man indeed sent from God, a prophet, to speak the words of God to those whom, he shall find waiting to listen to him. With such preparation as this, no teacher can ever fail in the work to which he has devoted himself.

## Chapter 4

### The Spiritual Element In Teaching

Many factors enter into successful Sunday school teaching. A good building is desirable. No doubt good Bible study has been secured in dark basement. No doubt good teaching can be done in a barn; but all will admit that an ideal Sunday school building is of great value in the making of an ideal school.

Good scientific teaching is also desirable. It would certainly be the ideal way to have all Sunday school teachers trained as public school teachers are now trained, not only in thorough knowledge of the things which they are to teach, but also in methods of teaching, so that they could give instruction in a scientific way. The time has gone by, when piety will serve as a teacher's only qualification.

Careful and painstaking preparation is also important. It will not do to neglect the study of the lesson through the week, and then expect the Holy Spirit to help one to teach effectively, intelligently and impressively, when one comes into the presence of a class. Prayer is mighty, but prayer will not bring into the life either gifts or graces for which we have been too indolent of toil.

Then, in emphasizing the spiritual element in teaching, there must be no disparagement of the value of the Bible words and facts which make up the body of the lessons. It is not suggested that the teacher should neglect the inspired text and spend his time in pious moralizing. Nor is he to substitute in place of such Scriptural matters, stories of his own, however touching and appealing they may be, supposing that in this

way he can better reach the hearts of his pupils than by opening up to their minds the words of God.

Nor will it do to despise the geography, the ethnography, the biography, the meteorology, the history, of the Bible. Some teachers think they must omit all such matters as these and dwell only upon purely spiritual things. But this is very superficial and ineffective teaching. The Bible is a book of facts. The Old Testament is chiefly a history of God's chosen people from Abraham to Malachi. The New Testament is chiefly a history of the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the beginning of the Church, with a handful of letters written by apostles to different churches and people. Nothing is too small to be noticed.

We should try as teachers to become thoroughly familiar with every statement, to know the meaning of every allusion. Then we should not regard our work with our pupils as well done if we have failed to make plain and clear to them the facts which form the framework of the lesson we are set to teach. One of the aims of every Sunday school teacher should be to know the Bible well as a book, to become conversant with its contents -- its histories, its people, its incidents, its allusions. Then, teaching will be intelligent, misinterpretation will be less frequent, and the Word of God will indeed make men wise unto salvation.

Yet there is always need to emphasize the spiritual element in Sunday school teaching. Recently there was published an account of a visit of an American to the Jewish schools and synagogues in the ancient city of Baghdad. The visitor was shown to the room where convened the highest court of the Jewish community. On a dais sat, in oriental fashion, five old men who were expounding the law to any who had questions of duty to propound to them. The guide called the visitor's attention to the venerable, white bearded rabbi in the center of this group, and said, "That is the most learned scholar of the Talmud in the world." "But," said the visitor, "We think we have some very learned rabbis in our country." "So you have," replied the guide, "but they study the Talmud as a science, while we study it as a religion.

This answer suggests two ways of studying the Bible -- as a science and as a religion. It may be studied only as literature; or it may be studied also as a book of religion, to learn from it its revealings of God, and its teaching concerning human duty. The first is not to be neglected, but the second is the vital thing, that without which no Sunday school teaching is complete or satisfactory.

A visitor to Westminster Abbey once heard a celebrated dean preach on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The sermon was brilliant and scholarly, and described with great vividness the scenes through which the visitor wrote to one of his friends, however, that he had learned a great deal about the way from Jerusalem to Jericho, but nothing of the way through earth to heaven.

The criticism may have been too severe, and yet it suggests a danger in all Bible teaching against which we need ever to be on our guard. We can readily imagine a teacher devoting the whole of the thirty or forty minutes of the lesson time, to the facts and incidents of the passage assigned for study, with not a minute for any spiritual instruction. Evidently this would not fulfill the true purpose of Sunday school instruction.

What is the object at which teaching should always aim? For one thing, it should be to make the pupils acquainted with the Bible as a book. But this is not the only aim. The Bible is given, primarily, to reveal us to the character and the will of God, and then to show us human need and the way of salvation. It is meant to guide us through this world to our Father's house. When we sit down before a class of children or young people, evidently our first duty is to tell them what the Word of God means for them. Failing in this, however well we may have taught the lesson, we have failed to teach the part of the lesson which we were appointed specially to make plain and clear to them. The messages of the Bible are personal and

individual; if the pupil gets no word for himself, going straight to his heart, the teaching has not reached its highest mission.

One day a primary class teacher was putting on a blackboard the golden text of the lesson. It was, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

When she had finished, one of the little ones, said, "O teacher, you have left out Jesus." She looked, -- the child was right. Too often the teacher leaves out Jesus in his teaching.

This suggests the importance of the practical and personal application of the lesson. What is the bearing of this portion of God's Word on the common, everyday life of our pupils? When we stand before our classes on Sunday, we must so interpret to them the words of the Scriptures we are studying that its heavenly light shall be cast upon their path on Monday and Tuesday. We may think of their life as it must be lived for six week days. Or perhaps we look back over the past week. Some of them have had sorrow. One has been sick, and is out again for the first time. One has come from an unhappy home. They all have had their struggles and some of them have been hurt in the week's life. We must so teach our lesson in the thirty minutes that every hungry, craving heart before us shall receive something, that not one of them shall go away unfed.

We must not fail to bring out the great facts of the lesson; but we must find also for our class the word of God that lies in these facts like a grain of gold in the ore. We must get the word for the sorrowing heart, for the one who is carrying the heavy burden, for the one who is pale from illness, for the one who has been hurt in the week's struggle, for the one whose home is not happy or does not help him heavenward. We must find a message of cheer for the discouraged one, a word of hope for the one who is almost despairing, and a word of warning for the careless one. Then we must put into each heart a thought of courage which will make it braver and stronger for another stretch of life until the Sabbath comes again.

We must try to make God real to our pupils, so that they may go forth conscious of his being, of his interest in them and his love for them. We must try to help them to realize the presence of Christ and to become conscious of his friendship. Then we must make them feel a sense of their own responsibility for life -- that for another week they must go out to live purely, sweetly, joyfully, unselfishly, helpfully. They must get inspiration from our lesson to help them to live with energy and hope, and with fear of God and love for men in their heart, for a whole new week of very real experience. We have our pupils for only one hour, but in that hour we should strive to put into their hearts impulses and inspirations which will make them live better, and work at their tasks more faithfully, until the Sabbath comes again.

Much of the teacher's power in spiritual work must lie in his own personality. Personality is the force at the heart of a man which gives energy, which drives the machinery of his life, which determines character. It is what a man is, which gives force and value to what he says and does. There are some people whose personality is so charming that it imparts a subtle influence to every common word they speak and the most trivial thing they do.

The teacher's personality is a most potent factor in his teaching. There are teachers, -- scholarly, well trained, who teach accurately, and pour on every lesson a flood of wisdom, yet who cannot keep a class together. Pupils will not stay with them. They have no attractive power. There are other teachers who have not one tenth of the teaching ability of these, and yet they hold pupils close about them, win their affection and confidence, and teach them lessons which make good Christians of them and prepare them for noble life. The secret lies in their personality -- they are spiritually minded. They have the love of Christ in them,

and this love fills all their being and sweetens all their life.

Few things are sadder than the mistakes made by some good people in their endeavor to teach religion. They show at least ordinary common sense in other matters, but the moment they begin to speak of Christ and religion all their naturalness forsakes them and they assume a tone of voice they never use when speaking on any other topic. They wear a long face, as if being a Christian were the saddest thing in the world. The whole manner of their treatment of the subject is such that happy, wholesome young people are repelled. How much better it would be if in all our presentations of religion we should make it bright, sunny and attractive, so that the young may learn to think of being a Christian as the sweetest, truest, loveliest life possible to them. Spirituality does not mean moroseness. Piety is not something gloomy and forbidding. Being godly is not being long faced. The ideal teacher should be full of sunshine and his speech full of song and cheer.

## Chapter 5

### The Teachers' Life as a Factor

Living must always go before teaching and must enforce it. Personal character is that which gives value and weight to our speech. We all know men who talk eloquently and say things, but whose words have little influence. The reason is that their life, as men see it, fails to give evidence of sincerity and earnestness. Then we know other men whose words are plain, perhaps who falter and stumble in speech, but whose lives are so true and so evidently Spirit filled, that their simplest sentences have weight and influence.

Other things are important. A teacher should be intelligent; inaccuracies of statement make marring and confusion in the minds of the pupils. He should not fail to be thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures which he is to expound, so that error in fact or in doctrine may never be taught by him. Wrong teaching in spiritual things may wreck a destiny. Ability to teach is also an important qualification in one who undertakes to instruct others. There are many people of large intelligence, whose knowledge of the subject concerning which they are to teach is full and accurate, but who lack the teaching faculty. A Bible teacher should be apt to teach.

Yet, while all these and other qualification are essential, that which after all counts for most in the teacher is the element of personal character. Nothing but 'heart' can reach and impress heart. It is life alone, which can quicken and nourish life. It is the man as he is--which gives influence and force to what the teacher says and does. It was Arnold the man, quite as much as Arnold the teacher, who did such important service for English boys at Rugby. The same is true of everyone who does effective and enduring work in school and class. This is especially true in Sunday school teaching, where the lessons to be taught are moral and spiritual, having for their object the building up of character. The best teachers, measured by scientific standards, will fail altogether of real effectiveness, if their teaching is not enforced and sustained by a good and worthy character.

It goes without saying that inconsistency in the life and conduct of a teacher vitiates, perhaps altogether annuls, the best and wisest instruction. We must not only point out the right way to those who sit before us to be taught and guided, but must ourselves walk in the way. Christ came in the flesh to bring the life of God down close enough to us for us to see it, and we in turn as teachers are to bring down in our own personality the life of Christ, close to those whom we would help, so that they also will follow Christ.

That was Paul's way of teaching, -- "I beseech you therefore, be imitators of me." He was to men, the interpreter of Christ. He invited people to look at him to see in his life, a miniature of Christ's. "Be imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ." He was not afraid to ask those he taught to take him as their example. Nor in this confidence did he take any honor from Christ. He was conscious in his heart that he was following Christ, and showing in his own life and character, the fruits of the Spirit which he desired to see in others.

Every teacher should have the same consciousness; he should make sure that if his pupils imitate him they will also imitate Christ. A little child came to her mother with this question: "Is Jesus like anybody I know?" She was trying to make out in her own thought what Jesus was like. Her mother should have been able to say: "Yes, I am trying to be like Jesus -- I am a little like him. Look at me, and you will learn what he is like." It requires a high order of Christian living to give one this confidence, but those who represent Christ as teachers should live near the Master, and should be so blameless in their character that they need not fear men's eyes. They should be able to say what Paul said.

How can we who are older and have more experience expect those younger than ourselves, who look to us for pattern and guidance, to try to live better than we are living? We can teach only what we know, and we really know of Christ only what we get wrought into conduct and character, into act and disposition. We can lead others only over paths that are familiar to our own feet. We are called to be witnesses of Christ, and a witness is not a repeater merely of something he has heard; he can tell only what he has seen and learned by personal observation and experience. No one can ever teach more of Christ than he knows through personal acquaintance and friendship with Christ. All efforts, therefore, to guide others further into spiritual life than we have gone ourselves, are futile and unavailing.

However glibly the words may fall from our lips, there is no power in that teaching which has cost us nothing more than a little memorizing of sentences. The lessons which impress others as we speak them must come out of our own heart, and must have been fused into the fabric of our own experience. We must have learned them for ourselves, perhaps in struggle and pain, or our most eloquent counsels and exhortations will have no more warmth in them than winter sunbeams dancing among icicles. Indeed, teaching with which our own daily life and conduct do not harmonize, inspires only sneers in those who listen to us. It does only harm to the cause we would advance.

Nothing comes of an irascible, quick-tempered man's moralizing on the duty of gentleness and sweetness of disposition. There is no use in a close, hard, exacting, miserly man commending the Master's teaching, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," for his conduct shows that he does not really believe what he commends. One who lives near to God is struck through, as it were, with the life and the Spirit of God. His very face is transfigured, as the inner light shines out through his features. His simplest sentences have an unction that makes them impressive. His presence is a benediction wherever he goes.

Every Sunday school teacher should seek to possess spiritual power. He can find it by living near to God. Those who commune with God will come from their closets to their classes, like Moses from the forty days on the mount, their faces shining with the brightness of God's holy love. Communion with God must always go before good service. There can be no largely useful life which is not inspired by fellowship with Christ. There is no other secret of spiritual power. Nothing can work the works of God, but God himself in the heart. There can be no mere imitation here. No set of rules can be prescribed, the following of which will produce certain spiritual results. Power in Christian work can come only through Christ living in us.

It is a serious responsibility which one accepts who becomes a teacher of the young; it is a perilous thing for a teacher to occupy a place in the presence of all the possibilities which lie in young lives, and then to be unfaithful or even negligent. It is a serious thing if, being helpful in many ways, the teacher yet fails in the higher spiritual work which belongs to one who is set as a guide to human souls. We may do many good things for our pupils who gather about us and look into our face; we may teach them many things that will adorn their life and character; we may impart to them knowledge that will be of value to them in their life and work; we may aid them in other ways -- in literature, in social life, in their general culture; yet, if we do not succeed in leading them to Christ, and fashioning in them the divine likeness, we have failed in that part of our duty and responsibility which is most essential and vital, that without which all our help avails nothing in the end.

A teacher needs to be most watchful and faithful, not only with his teaching, but also in his personal life, that from the end of it all, when he faces eternity, he may not have to look back with tears of repentance over a failure. Of all the solemn sayings of Jesus, none are more solemn than his words concerning him who should cause one of his little ones to stumble. "It is better for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea." We need the mind of Christ in us, the gentleness of Christ, the patience of Christ, that we may never misguide a child that asks us the way home; and we need to be filled with the grace of Christ, flowing out in conduct, disposition, and character, so that never by any act, word, or influence of ours, we may cause a little one to stumble, hurting a soul we might have helped to save.

## Chapter 6

### The Teacher Representing Christ

It is a great advantage to have clear and definite thoughts of duty. Many people seem never to have any very serious views of life. They do not know for what purpose they are in this world, what their mission is. Indeed they never give any earnest thought to the matter. They appear to have no conception of the responsibility of being in this world.

Many live as if there were neither God nor man nor Devil--as if there were neither moral law, nor human accountability, nor divine judgment. But too many others who even call themselves Christians and who recite their creed on every opportunity seem also to live almost as indifferently as these. They have no thought of their relation to the kingdom of Christ, of their place as redeemed ones, belonging to God, or of their duty as Christians to do Christ's work in the world.

Not many even godly Christians seem to understand their personal responsibility as coworkers with God, as helpers of Christ in saving the world. It is important that those at least who as teachers are earnestly desirous of doing their part in guiding others, should have a clear conception of what they are to do and how they are to do it.

The mission of Christians in this world was very clearly defined by the great Teacher, when he said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." That is, we bear the same relation to Christ that he bore to the Father and we are sent by Christ. What a dignity, sacredness, and a seriousness it gives to our life, to remember that we are sent from Christ and for him! We are not in the world in any mere haphazard way, or on any mere chance errand; we are sent from God. It follows that we represent him who sent us: we are his ambassadors; we speak for him. This is true not only of ministers, those who are ordained to the holy office; it is true of every Christian, and especially of those who are called to teach

others the truths of divine revelation.

Our mission, too, is the same as was that of Christ. He was called the Word. A word reveals thoughts. Our friend stands before us silent, and we know not what is in his heart. Then he speaks, and his words tell us what his feelings are. The world could not know the thoughts that were in the heart of God. No man could go up to heaven to see God. Then God sent his Son -- the Word -- to reveal his thoughts, and men learned that God is their Father, with a father's love, care, tenderness, compassion. They learned also the divine mercy and grace. For three years Jesus went about speaking in human language great thoughts about God and showing in his life the dispositions, affections, feelings, and character of God. We, too, in our little way, are to be words of God, revealing what is in the divine heart. As Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father," we should be able to say, "He who has seen me has seen Christ."

This teaching puts upon us a sacred responsibility. Wherever we go we must be as Christ. Christ is no more here in his own humanity -- we are now the body of Christ. He does not go about doing good, but we are to go about and do what he would do, if he were here again. We are to be Christ to others, and we need to watch our life, lest sometimes we misrepresent him. We should never give a wrong interpretation of any thought, feeling or spirit of Christ.

It is part of our work as Christians to do the work of Christ. For three years he went up and down the land, speaking the words of God, doing the works of God. Those were wonderful days. Then he died on a cross. How he must have been missed when he came no more to the people's homes! What a blessing his ministry had been, with its miracles of healing and its common kindnesses which cheered and brightened so many lives! The world needed just such love amid its need, pain and sorrow. How much poorer this earth seemed when it was known that Jesus was dead, that he would go among the sick and troubled no more! What a pity it seemed that such a ministry should cease!

Yet it did not cease. Jesus went away himself, but he had trained his disciples to do the gentle things he himself had been doing for three years, and now sent them out to continue the ministry. It is the mission of Christ's followers, wherever they are, to do the things that Jesus would do if he were here. We cannot perform miracles, but we may do many Christly things. His love should ever be in our hearts, revealing itself in whatever forms a helpfulness the human needs about us may require.

"Is your father at home?" a gentleman asked a child, on the village doctor's doorstep.

"No, sir," the boy answered; "he's away." Where do you think I could find him?"

"Well, you've go to look for him some place where people are sick, or hurt, or something like that. I do not know where he is, but he's helping somewhere."

If one had been seeking for Jesus in Galilee, he would have found him where people were sick or distressed in some way. He was always helping somewhere. By the same mark his disciples should be known in any community. They should always be helping someone, comforting sorrow, giving cheer, encouragement, strength. Thus the ministry begun by Christ, nineteen hundred years ago, in the little country of Palestine, should go on wherever the followers of Christ are found.

Especially should those who are set to be teachers of others in spiritual things, carry out this part of the Master's commission.

They represent Christ and it is not enough that they tell in words the meaning of Christ's gospel; they should also, in their own lives, truly and faithfully represent Christ as a minister of good, a giver of help, and a dispenser of blessing.

It is part of the mission of Christians also to help Christ to save the world. He was sent to redeem the lost. He gave his life in service of love to lift up the fallen. We are exhorted to have the mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus -- the love which brought him from glory. We are not sent as he was to die on the cross; one atonement was sufficient. Yet we are to have the same love for the lost that he had. Instead of taking us to a cross it should lead us into a life consecrated to the saving of the world. We never can be as Christ was in the world, and continue to live for ourselves. Service is the key word of the Christ-life service, even to sacrifice. We must lay down our lives in love, whether it be in living or dying.

These are hints of the meaning of the words of Christ when he said that as the Father had sent him, so he sends us. What he was to the people among whom he went in his large way as the Son of God, we are to be to those among whom we move in our small way as his followers. We are his apostles as he was the Father's Apostle. We are to reveal him in our lives as he in his life revealed the Father. We are to continue the ministry of love which he began. We are to give ourselves for the world as he gave himself on Calvary.

All this may seem discouraging. The responsibility of representing Christ and being to the world in any measure what he was may appear to be too vast to be met by any human soul. But there was something else which Jesus said which makes us ready to take up our burden. Immediately after defining the relation of his disciples to him and to the world, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Without the empowering of the Spirit, they never could have been in the world what he had been. The Holy Spirit is in one sense the same as Christ returned to earth. Instead of living now in one human body--he lives in every believer. Thus he is really continuing his own ministry in his people. The love that is in us, is but the love of Christ beating in our heart. The holiness that we attain is but the holiness of Christ reproducing itself in our lives. The beautiful things that appear in our characters -- love, joy, peace, long suffering, meekness -- are but the graces of Christ wrought in us by his own indwelling -- the fruits of the Spirit, as Paul calls them.

We never can have these qualities in us unless we receive the Holy Spirit. No mere human culture can produce them. They are fruits which do not grow on the stalk of nature. We can do the works of God only if God be in us. But that is what it is to be a Christian. "Christ lives in me," is Paul's description of himself as a believer. There is no other true definition.

How can we receive the Holy Spirit and thus have the divine life in us? The word "receive" answers the question. The Spirit never will be forced upon us; we must receive him. It requires an act of our own. We can shut him out of our lives if we will. In receiving the Spirit we must surrender everything to him. He must be admitted to rule, to guide, to sway all the life.

An Old Dutch picture shows a little child dropping a cherished toy out of his hand. At first one does not understand why he does this, but close observation shows, at an upper corner of the picture, a white dove which is flying toward the empty, outstretched hands. The child has dropped the toy to receive the dove.

Ofttimes our hands clutch things which are dear, things which we have toiled hard to gain. But there is something better, -- "Receive the Holy Spirit" are the words which fall from the lips of Christ. Shall we not gladly drop out of our hands any possessions, any pleasures, anything, in order that we may receive the dove of peace?

People talk about having to give up so much to become Christians; but do they give up much? Or is the giving up to be compared with the receiving? Is the man making a sacrifice who drops his work tool--to take gold, silver and precious gems? Shall we talk of giving up, when we let go our toys and glittering trifles, to receive the Holy Spirit? Were the first disciples losers when they left their nets and boats and homes and went after Christ--to find homelessness, persecution and martyrdom? It seemed a loss but they dropped out of their hands only a few poor, perishable things--to receive imperishable riches, honors and glories.

We should never hesitate, therefore, to yield our lives to the Holy Spirit, whatever emptying of our hands it must take to prepare the way. To receive the Spirit is to let God take us, that he may bless us and use us in being as Christ to a weary, suffering and sinning world.

Those who would lead others into complete surrender, into fullness of blessing, into nobleness of confession, themselves need all the fullness of God, that they may truly represent the Master in the world.

## Chapter 7

### The Teacher's Spiritual Culture

The word culture is used first of land -- the act of tilling and preparing it for fertility. The ground is cultivated in order to make it yield the best harvests. The word is applied also to the act of promoting growth in plants, especially with a view to the improvement of their quality and the production of new varieties. It is wonderful what results are obtained in flowers, for example, by culture.

The word is used also of the improvement of the mind and the refinement of the character, under the influence of education. It is not only the acquiring of knowledge, the becoming familiar, for example, with literature, that is meant; it includes also the effect on the life, the thoughts, the feelings, of familiar contact with refinement. We all know the influence on the nature of intimate association with those who are intelligent and refined.

There is also a spiritual culture, the improving, enriching and refining of the spiritual part of our being. We begin our Christian life as spiritual children, in the lowest grades at school. Yet we are to grow in all the qualities which belong to the beautiful Christian character. Spiritual culture is the process by which our nature is softened and mellowed into the gentleness of love, our talents are developed into their best possibilities of usefulness, and our whole life is transformed into the beauty of Christ.

It is very important that those who teach others should themselves have a rich spiritual culture. We cannot impart what we do not possess. The influence of one's personality is among the most potent influences in one's life. Manners are far more important than we are apt to suppose. Our smallest crudeness is as dead flies in the perfumer's ointment, which mar its sweetness. Refinement is in itself not only a charm--but a subtle power in one's personality. There is a spiritual refinement in some people which adds manifold to the value of all they do or say. It is indefinable. We cannot analyze it nor tell what its secret is, but it is an unmistakable power. Everyone who would guide others in spiritual things should seek for this charm of spiritual culture.

We should long for the best

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