

Your Spiritual Life

Growing and Modeling

by James Riley Estep, Jr.

The teacher of geometry needs to know geometry and teaching methods. If he knows those two things, it matters not how he lives his life; he can still effectively communicate the axioms and theorems and produce students who know geometry.

The teacher of the Bible needs to know the Bible and teaching methods. But she must have more as well. She must live by the principles she would teach to others. Teaching Sunday school is not merely an exercise in communicating facts; it is a shared adventure in following Christ. And as someone has said, “You cannot lead where you have not already walked.” This means that teachers must be constantly in tune with the condition of their spiritual lives.

Overview of Three Domains

Spiritual maturity (or lack of it) manifests itself in three ways: Christian worldview (life of the mind), Christian experience (heart), and Christian service (hands). We may refer to these as the *cognitive*, *affective*, and *active* domains of spiritual maturity, respectively.

We see these three reflected in Scripture. It is said of one of the Old Testament’s most recognized teachers, “Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws” (Ezra 7:10). Notice that Ezra didn’t teach until he had prepared his heart (affective), had sought the law (cognitive), and had put his faith into practice (active).

This model has found many contemporary expressions in Christian literature and within congregations. We grow in spiritual maturity through study (sharpening our Christian intellect, our life of the mind), devotion (heart), and service (putting faith into active practice).

The Domain of the Mind

Bible teachers have to study in preparing their lessons. This study, of course, aids the teacher's own spiritual development. However, it is a mistake to assume that lesson preparation is sufficient to promote your own spiritual maturity in the domain of the mind. Teachers should make sure they are *being* taught. Self-study of Scripture is a good thing, but you should also be part of a group where you are the student, learning from another. Furthermore, your personal study of Scripture should not be limited to lesson preparation, but should include study for personal benefit.

The Domain of the Heart

Teachers should also have a regular practice of devotion. "Having daily devotions" does not simply refer to personal Bible study. Rather, it means practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, personal worship, and journaling. Some teachers neglect this dimension of their spiritual lives, substituting lesson preparation time for personal devotion. This is a mistake.

Having an established practice of devotion, perhaps by using a devotional or prayer guide, helps the teacher center his or her inner life (heart) on God. This happens not only in a daily "quiet time" of devotions, but also in a group setting. The sharing that happens in the context of relationships can benefit the spiritual lives of everyone present.

The Domain of Service

Yes, teaching is your service, and being a teacher aids in the promotion of your spiritual life. But how about also committing yourself to acts of service outside of your teaching role? Many adult Bible study classes not only gather to learn, but also schedule opportunities for their class members to serve in the church and community on a regular basis.

Dual Concern

Teachers should have a dual concern for their spiritual lives. Primarily, we are to be concerned for our own growing and deepening relationship with God through Jesus Christ. However, we must also be concerned with how our spiritual maturity is modeled to others. The teacher should serve as an example of one who is maturing in Christ in all three domains. That too is part of teaching.