Teaching the Barrier

Part 2 in a Series of Problem Student Tips

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The previous chapter launched us on a consideration of four types of “problem students” who make their presence felt in the classroom: *the bored, the barrier, the boss,* and *the bomber.* We addressed the first of these four last time; now let’s turn our attention to the second. We will consider the remaining two in the next two chapters.

Four Types, More Imperatives

The New Testament offers imperatives regarding how Christians are to relate to each other. We mentioned the imperative of intercessory prayer above. But there are other imperatives to consider as well.

Many imperatives are found in the New Testament’s “one another” passages. We are to love one another (John 13:34). We are to honor one another (Romans 12:10). We are to accept one another as Christ accepted us (Romans 15:7). If you take some time to scan through the “one another” passages, you’ll see that this just scratches the surface!

These passages serve to remind us that good teaching involves much more than mastery of teaching techniques. To reach your students, you must have a Spirit-filled relationship with them. Such a relationship will have much more to do with your effectiveness as a teacher than the brilliance of your lesson plan and presentation.

The Master’s teaching was always relational, and you can tailor the “one anothers” specifically to each student, no matter what category they fall in. The fact that the teacher communicates relationally with the students beyond the Sunday school hour is a powerful antidote for all that would otherwise hinder the effectiveness of your teaching.

One Strategy, Three Steps

Let’s focus on *the barrier.* This student, unlike *the bored,* is engaged and sincerely has something to offer during class. Unfortunately, the barrier’s contribution has nothing to do with your lesson! You need a strategy for dealing with this situation that affirms both the barrier and the class while keeping the class on target.

Picture this: You’re making good headway as you teach a lesson on devotional life from the Psalms. Suddenly, *the barrier* asks a question that deals with the end times! We call this kind of question a “rabbit trail”; if you start down that path, you’ll be a long time trying to get to the end. It is a distraction from your lesson and should not be pursued.

How do we deal with such a barrier? Let’s explore three steps to take in order to keep your class on task without doing harm to the person who is a *barrier*.

*First, know your lesson plan and stick to it.* Granted, there will always be legitimate “detours” or some need to be attended to. But detours should be the exception and not the rule. Lesson outlines help not only you but also the students in this regard. Use your lesson plan as a litmus test for the relevancy of the barrier’s issues, comments, and questions. If the question is completely unrelated to the lesson’s purpose, you will not entertain it.

*Second, affirm both the barrier and the rest of the class when confronted with a rabbit trail.* Rather than ignoring, rejecting, or challenging the barrier’s comment or question, affirm the barrier by briefly acknowledging the importance of his or her point. But then graciously remind the barrier that while there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1), the time for that topic is not now, but that you are available to discuss it after class. Affirm the class as a whole by quickly moving on and sticking with the lesson.

*Third, address the barrier’s point with him or her personally right after class or as soon as possible.* It is your relationship with the barrier and not the detour or even your lesson that is paramount. Your positive action in this regard will speak volumes to your students. If you do not touch base after class with the student who has a question—either to answer the question or to arrange a time to discuss it—then you have done nothing but simply brush off that student. This is rude and will do harm to your relationship with that student and with the class.

As with the other three types, I hope my barrier students show up! May you rise to the challenge of teaching all your problem students effectively for the glory of God.