

Teachability: The Mark of a True Leader

Lists can be remarkably instructive and challenging, especially when they appear in articles and blog posts that address matters relating to Christian living and Christian leadership. Many are not aware that the Bible is big on lists. There are lists of things to avoid, list of things to do, and lists of leadership qualities (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5.) There are lists concerning the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21) and lists of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).

We can learn much from lists of ideas, attributes, warnings, and commands as they help us to know what God’s desires are for our lives and how he would have us live—both as a follower and as a leader. As we are led by him, empowered by him and seek to honor him, we will want to pay close attention to what is found in such lists so that we might trust the Holy Spirit for ongoing personal transformation.

I have been a Christian for 53 years and in vocational Christian ministry for 45 years. During this time I have given a great deal of thought to the content of all the many lists in Scripture where the Lord expresses his desires for us. And I have come to the measured conclusion that when it comes to the indispensable qualities for being a leader in the body of Christ and in life in general, there is one characteristic that perhaps should be placed at the top: teachability.

To be teachable means that you have the mind-set of a life-long learner. You are consistently open to learning from anyone at anytime on any topic. There is no way to escape the fact that being teachable is foundational to spiritual growth and character development in all other areas of our walk with the Lord.

I have met Christians, advanced in age, who are still teachable, and I have met young Christians who are not. I am personally acquainted with some extremely humble leaders but I’ve also crossed paths with some arrogant leaders who have a hard time listening to anyone but himself or herself!

Shortly after I was married, I began to memorize Proverbs 13:10 in the King James, “*Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom.*” Due to my poor handwriting, my wife, Susan, thought the P was a B and asked why the Bible would say only by “bride” cometh contention. We both had a good laugh. Here is the same passage in the ESV: “*By insolence comes nothing but strife, but with those who take advice is wisdom.*”

Wisdom, from God’s perspective, lies in knowing how to take advice without being either defensive or condescending. Wisdom is evident when we humble ourselves to learn even from those who admittedly know less than we do and are perhaps not as experienced in the issues of life.

If there is one book in the Bible that majors in teachability, it would be the book of Proverbs. Here are two of the more instructive verses in Proverbs on being teachable:

“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Prov. 18:2).

“And you say, how I hated discipline and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to instructors” (Prov. 5:12,13).

When I'm thinking of investing in a potential leader, the first quality I look for is whether or not he has a teachable spirit. When I observe a passionate hunger to learn and grow and a genuine humility that is willing to be taught, confronted or corrected, there is no limit to what that leader can accomplish or how much influence he might exert in the kingdom of God.

I have known a few leaders who wanted to learn, but somewhat ironically didn't want to be taught. They wanted to learn on their own and were not sincerely open to having anyone else speak into their lives. It's sad, to say the least.

If a leader is not teachable he will be resistant to hearing instruction both from God and others and will likely make little progress when it comes to personal growth and spiritual maturity. The unteachable leader will eventually fall into other sins and disqualify himself. If a person is truly teachable, he is open to whatever God might wish to show him on virtually any issue and in regard to all sin.

If the leader is truly teachable, he will freely grant other people permission and freedom to speak into his life, even on matters that we might otherwise regard as extremely personal and, in other contexts, off limits.

Warren Myers was one of my early coaches who went to be with Jesus at the age of 78. Warren had spent his life studying the Bible and knew it and lived it better than any man I have ever known. He was not perfect by any means, but when it was clear he had sinned, he was quick to own it and to ask for forgiveness from the Lord and from anyone against whom he had sinned.

We connected over lunch in Colorado Springs just a few months before he went to be with Jesus. He asked me (it was his habit to ask countless questions!) what Jesus had been recently making clear to me. As I began to share, he took notes on what I was saying for his own personal growth. I couldn't believe it—at 78, he was still growing, still learning—even from one of his disciples.

Are you truly teachable? Can you be confronted without bristling or making excuses for yourself? Do you ask questions when you are with others or are you quick to tell everyone your opinion on the topic at hand? Are you reading books that facilitate your ongoing maturity and influence for the kingdom? In short, are you growing in “The Indispensable Quality Every Leader Needs to Possess?”

I met a career missionary at LAX and drove him to his destination. He had been working on a list of characteristics to look for in potential missionary candidates for his organization. He read his list to me and asked what I thought. I told him that all of the qualities were excellent, but I felt there was one that was missing. He didn't have being teachable on his list. Being teachable himself, he quickly added it.

Recently I watched a 30-second video clip from a leader on what he thought was a leader's greatest fault. Following that clip, and for several weeks running, various individuals of considerable influence from around the country weighed in on what, in their opinion, would be a leader's greatest fault. I suspect that many of us would mention such things as insecurity, pride, sexual immorality, ministry idolatry, financial mismanagement, or an overall lack of integrity in our interactions with others.

While I certainly can't dispute the importance of such factors, I would insist that we have failed to understand the essence of leadership if we omit the critical role played by teachability.

How would you recognize a genuinely teachable leader? I believe the answer is simple. He will typically ask more questions than he will provide answers. He will listen and observe more than he will talk. We should not ignore the proverbial saying that it's not by accident that we have two ears and one mouth. The godly leader whose life will impact many is a man who listens at least twice as long as he speaks.

The teachable leader will not only humble himself to listen and learn, but when the time comes for him to teach, the first thing he will inculcate in his students will be the importance of seeking knowledge and wisdom wherever it may be found. When one thinks he has arrived, he has no grasp of how truly distant he is from his destination.

The final point we must consider is the underlying cause of the lack of teachability in a man: pride. We read this in Proverbs 26:12 –

“Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov. 26:12).

Why is true? Because *pride puts a person beyond the perceived need for instruction*. The proud man says to himself: “I don't need the wisdom of God's Word. I've already got it. I don't need the instruction and encouragement of others; I'm beyond that sort of thing. I don't need to be held accountable for my actions. Who are they to tell me what to do or not to do?” The proud heart is impervious to rebuke and insensitive to conviction. That's why he's more hopeless than the fool.

So how do we uproot pride from our hearts and become teachable? How do we overcome its insidious influence in our lives? There are many answers, but none more helpful than the principle we find in 1 Corinthians 4:7.

“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

To know that all we have is a gift, that all we experience and enjoy is an expression of God's goodness and not ours, is to take the first step in dethroning pride from our hearts and cultivating an attitude of teachability.