

## "Teachable"

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<sup>1</sup>To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. <sup>2</sup>O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. <sup>3</sup>Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. <sup>4</sup>Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. <sup>5</sup>Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. <sup>6</sup>Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. <sup>7</sup>Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! <sup>8</sup>Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. <sup>9</sup>He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. <sup>10</sup>All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. <sup>11</sup>For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. <sup>12</sup>Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose. (Psalm 25:1-12)

Each year around the time of the Super Bowl, I get together with a group of Presbyterian pastors for a few days. We watch the game on Sunday night, we catch up and talk about our various ministries, and we manage to find some time to play a little golf. Sunday was a rainy mess, so Monday's golf was pretty muddy and ugly. Tuesday, however, was beautiful, and the golf was much better. Because none of us get to play that often, we decided that we would play a modified format that allowed each group to pick the best drive and let everyone play the rest of the hole from that point. This meant that on short holes (the par-3's) someone would usually get a ball on the green in pretty good position so that everyone would have a putt at a birdie. On one of those shorter holes we had about a twenty foot putt for birdie. We all tried our best to read the break of the putt. We agreed that it seemed to break about two inches to the right. The first putter tried it and it missed on the low side of the hole. The second putter, learning from the first, allowed for a little more break, but he missed the hole to the left on the upper side of the hole. Based on what we had learned, we figured the correct line would split the difference between the first two putts. Although my putting has been a bit of an Achilles Heel for me recently, this time I managed to get the putt off on the correct line and it caught the upper edge of the cup and fell in for a team birdie. Now I wouldn't really say that I was a hero, but it was... heroic. It was something that a hero might do.

But here's the real reason I am describing this event to you. As we walked off the green, one of my playing partners slapped me on the back and said, "I don't care what they say about you. You **are** teachable!" A general rule of golf banter is that any compliment must be cloaked in a back-handed insult. So, mission accomplished. But what he said was true. I made that putt because I had gone to school on the ones that came before mine. My two friends who putted before me taught me how to find the correct path, and I had learned from them. I had been, at least in this case, teachable.

That is what this Psalm, which we read on this first Sunday of Lent, is all about. It is all about teaching, learning, and finding the right path. "*Make me to know your ways, O LORD,*" the psalmist writes; "*teach me your paths.*" Again and again, the psalms compare the life of faith to walking the right path. "*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread...*" (Psalm 1:1); "*Show me [Lord] the path of life...*" (Psalm 16:11); "*My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped...*" (Psalm 17:5); "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path...*" (Psalm 119:105). And nowhere is this theme more pronounced than here in this 25th

Psalm. "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." (v.10). The writer of this psalm is convinced that the only way to find the straight and narrow path is to submit to the teaching and tutelage of God, and this poet is completely ready to do so. "Lead me in your truth, and teach me," he says. He wants to be taught. He wants to learn. He is ready to be shaped, reformed, and placed once more onto the path of righteousness.

This psalm is, therefore, a perfect introduction for the season of Lent. It describes the spiritual mindset that we need to make the most of this time of preparation. We, too, want to be taught by the Master. We, too, want to learn the secrets to faithful living. We, too, want to be guided down the path that leads to health, fullness, joy, and life. We want to be teachable. So, what does this psalm tell us about our teachability? I see in this psalm four characteristics of the teachable disciple, four traits that will help us begin this journey of Lent in the right way.

The first characteristic of the teachable disciple is **humility**. I once saw in the paper a Charlie Brown cartoon that I have remembered ever since. Snoopy is sitting on top of his red doghouse in front of his typewriter. Charlie Brown comes up and says, "I hear you are writing a book on theology." Turning to walk away, Charlie Brown adds, "I hope you have a good title." Alone in the next frame, Snoopy thinks to himself, "I have the *perfect* title." And the final frame shows Snoopy typing out this title: "Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might be Wrong?" Charles Shultz was a pretty good theologian, and he knew the church, and he noticed that many times in the church we assume we know the right answer. We think we have a pretty good handle on the truth, and we get so locked into our own interpretations that we don't realize how conceited, stubborn, and closed-minded we have become.

The writer of this psalm does not have this problem. He is not assuming that he already knows everything he needs to know. It *has* occurred to him that he might be wrong. "[God] leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way," the psalmist writes. If we wish to be teachable disciples, we must approach God, and approach faith, with an openness and a willingness to change -- with a recognition that the proclamations we have been espousing and the assumptions we have been making may not be in full alignment with the proclamations and assumptions of God.

The second trait of the teachable disciple is **responsibility**. Good coaches who are trying to build good teams want recruits who are "coachable." They are not looking for athletes who can never accept that they did something wrong... the ones who say "I struck out because the sun was in my eyes" or "I fouled out of the game because the ref had it out for me." Maybe we didn't study as much as we should have for the test, but we still adamantly protest that the reason we failed the test is that the teacher phrased the questions badly.

Again, the disciple in this psalm is not making any of those mistakes. He openly admits that he has messed up. "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions," he says. "Pardon my guilt, O LORD, for it is great." Lent is certainly a time for repentance -- for an open and honest acknowledgement that we have sinned against God, that we have sinned against our brothers and sisters, and that we have wandered off the path. The teachable disciple begins from this place of honest responsibility, knowing that he or she needs both forgiveness and a guiding hand to get back on the right track.

This brings us to the third characteristic of the teachable disciple, which is another thing that good coaches look for in their athletes. Coaches want to know that their players are committed. They want to know that each and every member of the team has the **discipline** to show up when he needs to show up, to do the work that she needs to do, and to prepare with diligence, energy, and passion. Coaches are not interested in people who are only "dabbling" in the sport. They want serious participants.

It is clear that the disciple in this psalm possesses that kind of discipline. He is ready to learn. He is ready to work. He is not just "dabbling" in this matter of faith. He is in it for the long haul. When he opens the psalm with the words "*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul,*" he uses a Hebrew verb that denotes the offering of a sacrifice. In essence, he is saying "*To you, O Lord, I offer my whole being.*" "*I am giving my life to you, Lord.*"<sup>1</sup> He knows his education will take time, and he is not daunted by this fact. "*For you,*" he says, "*I wait all day long.*" The psalmist is committed to a daily discipline of transformative, life-changing study, reflection, and work.

Last but certainly not least, the disciple who is ready to learn and be taught approaches the task with **hope**. This entire psalm pulses with a hopeful spirit -- a conviction that, by following the teaching of the Lord, the disciple's life will be better. He knows that the things at the end of this path are all good things: salvation, mercy, grace, steadfast love, and faithfulness.

In recent months some wonderful pictures of Pope Francis have gone viral. Back in October of last year he spoke in Rome to the families and athletes of the Italian Special Olympics soccer team. About halfway through the event, the youngest member of the team, five-year-old Gemma Pompili, was scheduled to give the pontiff a special pair of red cross-training shoes that bore the team's insignia. Little Gemma, who has Down's syndrome, went up at just the right time and did just what they asked her to do. She smiled from ear to ear as she handed the fancy red lace-up shoes to the pope. After that, she was supposed to return to her seat next to her parents. But Gemma, on the spur of the moment, made a spontaneous and unilateral change of plans. She decided that she didn't want to go back to her seat -- that she would rather go up to where the pope had been sitting. So she stepped up onto his platform, scooped a white padded stool next to his chair, and took a seat. Without missing a beat, the pope walked back up to his chair. He took Gemma's hand and proceeded to deliver his entire sermon with her little hand in his. Periodically, the little girl would say "Papa" to the pope, just in case he had forgotten that she was there. The most amazing thing was that prepared remarks actually spoke to the value of inclusion, the power and blessing of bringing people of diverse backgrounds and abilities together onto a common playing field. But on that day, the preaching of the leader of the Catholic church, a man revered by millions of Christians around the world, was completely upstaged by a little girl with Down's Syndrome who delivered a sermon that was much more amazing than any he could have uttered in words.<sup>2</sup>

The power of that sermon was made possible because Pope Francis — as powerful as he is, as wise as he is, as significant as he is — is, at the end of the day, just another teachable disciple trying to walk, as best he can, the path that the Master has laid out for us. It was not the moment that he had planned, but he met that moment

with the **humility** of one who does not assume that he has all the answers...

with the **responsibility** of one who recognizes his own blindness and limitations...

with the **discipline** of one who is always on the watch for the hand of God and also firmly committed to having that hand take hold of his own and guide him on the way...

and with the **hope** of one who seeks inspiration and teaching even from the smallest and meekest of fellow travelers.

In this holy season of Lent, may we too seek to be teachable disciples, so that we too might be shown the way that we should choose.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> J. Clinton McCann, "Commentary on Psalm 25:1-10,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3587](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3587), accessed February 15, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Sofia Petkar, "PAPA DON'T PREACH: The REAL story behind that viral photo of Pope Francis and a little girl with Down's syndrome is even cuter than the fake Facebook posts about it," <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5578718/pope-francis-girl-down-syndrome-real-story/>, accessed February 15, 2018.