The "Fully Cooked" Sunday School Lesson

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Imagine this situation with me. You are having an honored guest over to your house for dinner. You want this person to feel loved and blessed after your time together. You want to show them the kind of hospitality that you would show to Jesus himself if he came to your house.

The evening arrives. Your guest walks through your door. Dinner is already on the table. But instead of a fully prepared and cooked meal, you have filled your dining room table with a buffet of individual ingredients.

You point to the parsley and say, "Smell this parsley. It is the freshest you can find."

You motion toward the salt, "Mediterranean Sea salt. The best money can buy."

Next you move to the raw chicken, "Completely organic. And farm raised to boot."

As you continue down your display of ingredients you talk up the raw potatoes, you boast about the richness of the heavy whipping cream, and you give particular attention to the onions that have yet to be peeled, chopped, or sauteed.

When your guest walks into your home and finds this ingredient exhibit, how do you think they will feel?

After getting over the confusion of it all, my guess is that they would feel like they didn't quite get what they were expecting. They thought they were getting an actual meal, but instead they got a bunch of random ingredients. Sure, the ingredients in and of themselves might be impressive, but they don't become a delicious meal until they are combined and cooked to perfection.

I think this parable has a lot to teach us about the ideal Sunday School lesson. This is because one of the easiest mistakes to make in teaching a Sunday School lesson is to do exactly what the poor fellow in this parable did: to present a list of random (albeit impressive) ingredients instead of providing a fully developed – "fully cooked" – lesson.

Recognizing "Ingredient List" Lessons

"Ingredient list" lessons come in several different forms. It is important for you to recognize these forms so that you can avoid them:

1. The Running Commentary

This is the most common kind of "ingredient list" lesson. In the "running commentary" lesson, the teacher treats each verse as a separate ingredient. They say, "Look at verse 1 and let me tell you everything about it. Now that we're done with verse 1, let's move to verse 2."

Taken to the extreme, this kind of lesson can turn into a long list of micro-lessons, as the teacher comments on each verse without tying them together or identifying a common theme. Or, in other words, without fully cooking the meal.

2. The Word Study

In this type of "ingredient list" lesson, the teacher homes in on a few words from the passage and treats them like individual ingredients. They plumb the depths of their Hebrew and Greek lexicons and come out with a treasure trove of knowledge about their individual word.

The danger here is that the teacher becomes like the poor fellow describing his salt, "Let me tell you all about the origin and history of these little grains." But the guest doesn't want to know about the salt; he wants to taste the salt in the context of a fully cooked meal.

So also, our hearers won't be served by a compendium of information about a single word or a series of single words. They need to know *how* the words contribute to the overall message and meaning of the passage. And they need to know *how* that message and meaning has implications for their lives. In other words, they need to know *how* the individual words complement the fully cooked meal.

3. The To-Do List

This is probably the worst kind of "ingredient list" lesson. In it, the teacher extracts a list of "things to do" from the passage without connecting those actions to the overall meaning and message of the passage, and without connecting them to the gospel that empowers our actions.

Surely, you've heard these kinds of sermons or lessons before: "Ten virtues that every Christian must exhibit from Ephesians 4" or "Five traits of a godly man from the life of Abraham." While God has created us in Christ for good works (Eph. 2:10), a list of commands disconnected from the life-transforming power of Christ and his Cross only leads our hearers to wilt under the curse of the law.

When we teach lessons like this, it is like the poor fellow from our parable compelling his guest to eat the individual ingredients on his table: "Try the parsley! Take a bite of the raw chicken! How about that salt?" Just as all these ingredients only become palatable when they are fully

prepared and cooked, so also the commands and "to-dos" of Scripture only gain traction in our lives when they are empowered by the gospel of grace.

The "Fully Cooked" Lesson

Now that we've seen some of the common "ingredient list" lessons that we should avoid, let's talk about what an ideal, fully cooked lesson should look like and how we can grow in our ability to produce them for our Sunday School classes.

1. A Method for Preparing a Fully Cooked Lesson

Just like you would need to follow a good recipe to prepare a delicious meal, you also need to follow a good method to produce a fully cooked lesson. The method I want to suggest to you consists of asking three important questions.

Question #1: **What is *The* Meaning?**

This is the most important question that you can ask of any text of Scripture that you are studying and teaching. To expand the question out a bit, you want to ask, "What did the original author say to the original audience in their original context?"

To arrive at an answer to this question, you'll need to read the passage repeatedly. You'll need to make close observations about the argument that the author is making. You'll need to consider the context of what comes before and what comes after this passage in Scripture and ask, "Why did God decide to put this passage *here* in his Word?" You'll want to consult the wisdom and insight that God has given other gifted teachers through reading a few select commentaries (to compare to your own study).

At the end of this process, you'll know you've answered this first question when you can write out the meaning of the passage in one sentence. This one sentence is the big idea (or the thesis) of the passage that summarizes all the parts.

***Question #2*: What is *My* Message?**

One of my favorite quotes comes from an unknown source in early church history: "Scripture is simple enough for a lamb to swim in, but deep enough for an elephant to sink in." In other words, the message of Scripture is so simple that a child can understand it and believe it. But the depths of Scripture are so deep that the saints from all ages can plumb them and never reach the bottom.

What that means is that there are a million possibilities for *how* you teach any section of Scripture. This is especially true when we are dealing with large portions of Scripture as we typically do in our Sunday School classes.

It is at this point when many of us revert to the "ingredient list" error and we decide to try to comment equally on every single verse in our assigned passage. But instead of doing that, we want to encourage you to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help discern the best way to teach the passage. The first step in preparing a Sunday School lesson is to discern the meaning of the passage, but then you have to prepare your message. The main point of the passage should be the main point of your lesson, but there is subjectivity in how to frame your message.

When you teach a Sunday School lesson, the most important thing is what God's Word says. But a close second in importance is what God is doing in *your heart* as you study the passage.

As you study the passage and prepare your lesson, pray that God burdens your heart with a particular message for your class. You'll know you've completed this step in the process when you can write out in one brief sentence the main burden or main point of your lesson. To the best of your ability, this should be *one* main point that you lean into and press into the hearts of your class.

One additional question you can ask to really make sure you have honed your message is this, "What is the one message that I want my class to hear from God this morning?" This message is the burden you want to impress upon your people as you teach this passage.

Question #3: **What are *Their* Marching Orders?**

Once you've identified the meaning of the passage (the big idea) and the Lord has given you a message (the burden) from that meaning, your next step is to think through the implications of that meaning and message for your class.

The best way to do that is by asking questions as you prepare. Here are a few good questions:

- How does this passage connect to the gospel?
- How will this message require my class to change their thinking?
- How will this message address the hearts of my class members?
- What changes do I want to see in my class and in the church as a result of this message?

2. Different Approaches to the Fully Cooked Lesson

One of the aspects that makes the "fully cooked" lesson ideal so challenging in our Sunday School ministry is that we often cover large portions of Scripture. We hear this feedback from our teachers all the time. And we fully agree. To teach a "fully cooked" lesson on three or four chapters of Scripture is a mammoth task. However, I it is not impossible.

Let us give you a couple approaches that you can use to accomplish this task:

The Comprehensive Approach

In this approach, you identify one main point from the entire passage of Scripture and walk through the whole passage in a summary fashion. This is actually what we've been doing on Sunday mornings in our Acts series. Pastor Heath (or our other pastors) rarely even reads the entire passage, but he typically unfolds a message that covers and summarizes much of the passage.

In our last lesson in the book of Judges, one of our teachers did a great job using this approach to his Sunday School lesson.

He began with a single main burden that brought unity to the message: *What happens when God's people reject him as King?*

From there, he unfolded three main points that each covered one chapter:

I. They Descend into Moral Depravity (ch. 19)
II. They Desire Unjust Vengeance (ch. 20)
III. They Display Spiritual Blindness (ch. 21)

While he didn't necessarily do a deep dive into any one section of this passage, he provided the class with an organized, comprehensive, and unified message on the entirely of the message. It was helpful, clear, encouraging, and convicting.

The Concentrated Approach

In this approach, you may briefly summarize the whole passage, but then you spend most of your time on a specific section of the passage. The main thrust of your message comes from this one specific section of the passage, and you allow the rest of the passage to serve as context.

While we all have a built-in tendency and desire to cover all the verses we've been assigned, we want to free you up here to recognize that there are different ways of doing that. It doesn't always have to be by reading and commenting on each verse (typically that isn't the best approach!)

Sometimes, the Lord has laid a specific section of the passage on your heart and given you a message from it, and you should follow His guidance and really lean into that section. As a Sunday School teacher, you have the freedom to do this and we would actually *love* to see more lessons using this approach in our Sunday School ministry.

Oftentimes, this approach will be the best way to ensure that your lesson has a unified and clear main message from the passage that the class will be able to discuss in their groups and walk away with into their week. This is what is most important for our classes – that we are getting into God's Word, and that God's Word is getting into us!

3. The Structure of a Fully Cooked Lesson

One of the most unappealing aspects of our poor friend's meal of individual ingredients is that the meal had no structure. It was just a hodgepodge of ingredients thrown onto the dining room table. A good meal requires purpose and order and intentionality. And the same is true of a good lesson.

In fact, oftentimes figuring out *what* a passage says is the easy part. The more difficult part is figuring out *how* you will structure your message so that your class will be able to walk away understanding the meaning of the passage and its implications for their lives.

Below are a few steps you can take to structure and organize your lesson so that it is "edible" for your class:

- Make sure your lesson has one main point (see above) and that you state that main point in the introduction of your lesson.

- Make sure your lesson has several subpoints that all connect back to the one main point. For instance, in a recent sermon I preached from Acts 12 my main point was, "*Ways to respond to revival when we are behind enemy lines*." My three subpoints outlined the passage and all connected back to that big idea. We should:
  (1) Expect Persecution by the Enemy (12:1-5)
  (2) Earnestly Pray for Deliverance from the Enemy (12:6-17)
  (3) Be Encouraged by Judgement on the Enemy (12:18-25)

- I don't share that to merely point to my work, but to demonstrate that you should have one main point that is supported by your connected subpoints. This aspect of preparing the lesson might be the most difficult. But it is a skill that you will improve in with practice and helpful feedback. The task of teaching is not merely communicating the fruit of your study. It is to craft your study into a fully cooked lesson.

- Make sure your lesson has an introduction that answers the question, "So what?" When you stand up to teach, you should assume that you need to convince your class that they need to listen to you. You only have a few moments to get that done. Within five minutes, they are either going to engage or check out. In your introduction, you need to prove to them why your message is vital for their lives.

- Make sure your lesson has a conclusion that ties your lesson together and leaves a lasting imprint on your class. There are tons of ways to do this: a final exhortation, a call to action, a compelling story, etc.

- Make sure your lesson has a good flow of explanation, illustration, and application.

    - For explanation, you need to ask: How can I explain the meaning of this passage in a way that will be clear, understandable, and compelling to my class?

- For illustration, you need to ask: How can I shed light on the meaning of this passage with stories, analogies, metaphors, word-pictures, and examples? While it can be easy to think that illustrations aren't that important, including them is a loving way to ensure that your class has a crystal-clear understanding of your message. Think about how often Jesus used illustrations in his teaching!

- For application, I have provided some guidelines above. You always want to be driving home the implications of your message for your class.

A Fully Cooked Lesson and Love

As teachers, one of the primary ways that God has called us to serve and love the church is through our words. As James emphasizes, this is one of the reasons why teaching is such a high calling – because it is *difficult* to control our words and use them as a vehicle for love.

But this is precisely what we are called to do. This is precisely how we can best serve and love our classes. The poor fellow from our opening parable *did not* serve and love his guest by throwing all the individual ingredients on the dining room table. And likewise, we *do not* serve and love our classes by teaching "ingredient list" lessons.

What this means is that we must work as hard as we can, with the strength that God gives us, to teach "fully cooked" lessons in our Sunday School classes.

And here's the good news: we have all the resources we need. We have the perfectly inspired Word of God. We have the Spirit of God dwelling inside of us and gifting us to teach. And we have one another to pray for one another and sharpen one another as we seek together to glorify him and serve our people in the lessons that we teach.

Reflection Questions

- What kind of lessons am I currently teaching? Ingredient list lessons? Or fully cooked lessons?

- What are some of the specific things I need to change or apply to my teaching to grow in teaching fully cooked lessons?

- What else do I need to feel fully equipped to teach fully cooked lessons on a regular basis?