

2017

Faith Through Practical Skills

Ray Carson Ph.D.

Southern Adventist University, rcarson@southern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jbfl>

Recommended Citation

Carson, Ray Ph.D. (2017) "Faith Through Practical Skills," *The Journal of Biblical Foundations of Faith and Learning*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jbfl/vol2/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer Reviewed Journals at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Biblical Foundations of Faith and Learning by an authorized editor of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

Abstract

While classroom learning forms the foundation for traditional notions of education and is necessary for academic learning, an education in practical skills is essential to prepare individuals for Christian service. The creation of man included physical, mental, and spiritual aspects; therefore, a complete education will include a balance among each of these three characteristics. Throughout Scripture, we see the effectiveness of God's methods in using the simple life and practical skills for the education and development of some of His chosen leaders. This article explores the education of several of these leaders and reveals why a practical education is still relevant and vital for the education and development of the faith experience.

Keywords: practical skills, mental, physical, spiritual, practical education, faith experience

Introduction

This article explores the value of practical skills in preparing individuals to serve God as seen in the lives of numerous biblical leaders but is exemplified most clearly in the life of Christ. In our mind's eye we have clear perceptions of Jesus as a baby in the manger; as a young boy questioning the religious leaders of the day; and of His ministry of healing, teaching, and prayer. We may also picture Him on the cross or in His glory in heaven with the Father. These perceptions of Him are all worthy of our contemplation, but there is another valuable aspect of His life that is not often considered. We tend to forget that He spent His early life and childhood in a humble, impoverished environment, and His youth and early manhood years as a tradesman. Life in this setting consumed thirty of His thirty-three and one half years on this planet. We would do well to consider this very deliberate and purposeful choice of how and where Christ spent the vast majority of His time while He walked on this earth. These circumstances were chosen by God and served as an ideal setting for His spiritual development. We shall also see that God used this same approach for character development with many other Bible leaders throughout history. This method continues to have relevance for us in the present day as we strive to train youth to develop Christ-like characters.

The very nature of creation reveals to us that our existence involves physical, mental, and spiritual realities; therefore, our education should include balance in each of these three realms (White, 1903). By design, man was to be engaged with the physical world around him and to be actively employed. Before the fall, God instructed Adam to dress and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15). After the fall, man was instructed that he should work all the days of his life (Genesis 3:19). Work was appointed for our good as a necessary part of our happiness. It not only provides for our temporal existence but at the same time develops our spiritual connection with our Creator. It teaches us the discipline needed to be successful in the physical realm, it affords the opportunity to empathize with the needs of others, and it continually confronts us with our own weakness and limitations, revealing the need for humility.

Scripture overflows with admonitions and examples on the value of work and the humbler approaches to true education. We shall see the effectiveness of God's methods in using the simple life and practical skills for the education and development of some of His chosen leaders. In addition to the examples from scripture, we will explore how this is still a viable factor for education and the development of the faith experience today.

Examples from Scripture

"God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:27). The fact that God often chose lowly and humble occupations as a means to train His representatives is seen in the education of Moses, the shepherd, the ministry of the Apostle Paul, the tentmaker, and even the ministry of Christ the carpenter. These humble methods often perplex us until we adequately explore the rationale behind them. The act of Christ washing the feet of the disciples was a mystery to them at the time, but later the reasons became apparent as the lessons of humility began to be absorbed and they were truly converted. Scripture provides us many other powerful examples of His lowly and meek methods as He prepared great leaders for their work. It seems paradoxical that God would consign one of Israel's greatest leaders, Moses, to forty years as a shepherd in preparation for leading the Israelites out of Egypt. It is equally puzzling that one of the most productive of the apostles, Paul, would spend valuable time working as a tentmaker or that Christ Himself would spend the largest part of His time on earth serving as a humble carpenter.

The Education of Moses

A logical assumption would be that an upbringing in the courts of Pharaoh would have been an ideal preparation for a liberator of the enslaved Israelites. This is exactly the type of education Moses was given; but as the story unfolds with the impulsive murder of an Egyptian, it is clear that he was not prepared and had to flee Egypt. Moses then spent the next forty years in the wilderness as a shepherd, unlearning and relearning. When God finally offered him the prospect of being the deliverer of Israel, he had such a humble opinion of himself that he attempted to convince God that he was not qualified for the job. Due credit must be given to his mother for her work in the very early years of his life before going to Pharaoh's court, but the time spent out in the fields tending sheep and living the simple life gave Moses time to think, reflect, and learn from the rigors of the pastoral life.

God provided Moses a different education than what we might expect. One close to the land and the common people, one that required getting dirty, one fraught with hard physical labor. God led Moses to experiences that engaged him in the practical duties of daily life, which awoke his sensitivities to see himself in comparison to God, not in comparison to other men. The worldly education led him in paths of pride and arrogance instead of humility; cold indifference instead of love and compassion. The contrast between his character before and after the forty years as a shepherd reveals more depth of character and humility. A quiet life connected to practical daily duties gave him time to mature.

The scriptures give evidence to the effectiveness of God's methods with Moses. When visited by his father-in-law, Moses was willing to listen to and comply with advice on more efficient ways to lead. "So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said" (Exodus 18:24). His humility allowed him to learn from those around him. His love for the people was evidenced by his request for God to blot him out of existence rather than destroy the rebellious Israelites (Exodus 32:32). God's methods with Moses developed humility and love, which were vital for success in his role of leadership and for his continued faith experience.

The Apostle Paul

The apostle Paul was raised as a member of the upper class of the Jewish nation. As was the practice of the time, he learned a trade as a youth. In the early part of his life, he had no need to practice that trade because of his position in society. However, as a Christian leader/minister, he engaged in his craft as a tentmaker. He certainly deserved the support of his brethren as he traveled and taught, but he often chose to work for his own financial support (Acts 18:3; I Corinthians 9: 6-19; 1 Thessalonians 2:5-9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8 & 9; Acts of the Apostles, p. 346). It would appear reasonable that he could have used his time more effectively by evangelizing and preaching instead of tent making. "But Paul did not regard as lost the time thus spent.... As he worked at his trade, the apostle had access to a class of people that he could not otherwise have reached" (White, 1911, p. 352). By working in this manner, Paul demonstrated that he was not exploiting the church for his sustenance as well as providing a great example of industriousness and self-sacrifice.

Paul was not unique in the experience of learning a trade as a young man. In the Jewish economy, training in practical skills was considered essential for all young people regardless of social status (White, 1911, p. 346). This was for good reason. It kept young people of the upper classes in touch with the rest of society. It provided a valuable backup resource in case of emergency, and it established a solid foundation for the development of a good work ethic, honesty, and a host of other positive character traits.

Christ's Example

Two of the most important lessons Christ sought to teach were humility and love. How is it that He who was one with the Father and by whom the worlds were created, who apparently had no need to be humble, chose to humble Himself in such an extreme manner in order to teach us this lesson? He tells us that we should come and learn from Him and the reason that He gives is not what we would expect. He asks us to come and learn from Him not because of His divine qualifications but because He is "meek and lowly of heart" (Matthew 11: 28-29). He did so in order for us to realize our need of also becoming meek and lowly. Christ's humility brought Him into subjection to the will of the Father, and He consistently stated that it was not His own will that He was intent on fulfilling, but the will of the Father (John 5:30; John 4:34; Luke 22:42; Matthew 26:42).

The lesson of learning to love one another goes hand in hand with the lesson of humility. Love, empathy, or even gratitude, are not possible without humility. Pride distorts our conceptions of ourselves and others; usually to the extent that we view ourselves as intelligent, capable, and worthy and others as the opposite. In contrast, the Bible tells us to esteem others better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). The practical duties of life help us put things in perspective.

The fact that Christ spent the largest portion of His life as a carpenter suggests that God places a high premium on this class of work, not only for the value of the work itself but for its value in character development. E.G. White explains how important every detail of Christ's life is and that the full significance of the plan of salvation is a theme that will take eternity for us to fully understand (White, 1956, 6, p. 1115). Therefore, all the choices made for Christ's first advent should be of special significance to us. The choices of parents, social status, geographical location, and every other circumstance were not by accident but by design to prepare Him for His ministry. His poverty was an advantage to allow Him to identify with the poor and downtrodden of the world and to allow them to identify with Him.

The parents of Jesus were poor, and dependent upon their daily toil. He was familiar with poverty, self-denial, and privation. This experience was a safeguard to Him. In His industrious life there were no idle moments to invite temptation. No aimless hours opened the way for corrupting associations. So far as possible, He closed the door to the tempter (White, 1898, p. 72).

He grew up in an environment designed to develop His character with no advantage over anyone else. The scriptures state that He was not even endowed with good looks that we should be attracted to Him (Isaiah 53:2).

All these circumstances of Christ's life seem to be an unlikely scenario for an individual to develop to His optimum potential, but those apparent disadvantages were in fact blessings. He would have missed many opportunities for character development had He come to a family of means and received a, so called, "good education" and become a priest or leader. Clearly, the circumstances that were determined for Him were the most appropriate for His development and preparation as the Savior of the world. He was placed where He could see and experience the human condition, not as a casual bystander, but as one whose lifestyle was intermeshed with the common people. Had He been born into a wealthier class, He may not have had this opportunity. His circumstances afforded Him intimate contact with those who were suffering and in need. Descriptions in *The Desire of Ages* (p. 68-74) tell of His childhood and His concern for the welfare of those less fortunate. He was assailed by temptations as we all are, but the setting in which He was placed was ideal for preparing Him for His ministry (White, 1898, p. 72).

Dr. Ben Carson (2008), in a graduation address to students at Southern Adventist University, mentioned that many individuals do not share the advantage he had in life by growing up poor with a mother of strong Christian values. He stated that being in an impoverished environment helped him value his education and appreciate the suffering of the unfortunate. One of the greatest disadvantages that well-meaning parents often place upon their children is to give them too many of the "good" things of life. We have all seen the pampered child who grows up self-absorbed and prideful because he or she has not had to exercise self-discipline or experience the hardships and disappointments of life.

If Christ was aware that He should be about His Father's business when he was a boy (Luke 2:49), then He must have known His purposes with even more certainty when He was in His twenties. It is interesting to observe, however, what He was doing at that time of His life. He was working daily as a master carpenter helping to support His family. The discipline of His trade equipped him for His ministry by developing His character as He exercised excellence in all that He did. He was waiting for the time when the calling of the Spirit would lead Him to the other aspects of His ministry. This served to demonstrate trust in the ways of the Father. At the miracle of the wedding feast, it is obvious that Christ was well aware of the need to wait on the Father because He stated that His hour had not yet come (John 2:4). Therefore, this time of His life as a carpenter was intentional, serving as a preparation for His ministry; as well as setting an example for others of the value and dignity of manual labor. These are lessons that do not come easily, especially for the young who are full of confidence and energy.

Some have conjectured that Christ followed the apprenticeship model in training His disciples. In the book, *Lead Like Jesus*, Blanchard & Hodges (2005) discuss the servant leadership concept and explain in depth how Jesus led the disciples through the Novice, Apprentice, Journeyman, and Master level experiences, much as a master tradesman would do when teaching someone a trade. It is likely that this apprenticeship model was experienced by Jesus Himself as He learned the carpentry trade.

How it Applies Today

The value of practical skills is just as important in our day as it was in biblical times. The principles of character development have not changed over time. In this fast-paced society, which flaunts materialism and self-centeredness, there is the same necessity for character development and love for one another. The imperative for practical skills starts with the training of young children at home extending through their growing years. If properly implemented, it can have a decisive impact on character, promoting compassion, humility, work ethic, and overall industriousness. These skills can be especially useful for teachers, ministers, and missionaries; earning them influence in their work of bringing souls to Christ.

The lessons of practical skills should be taught from an early age and be ongoing throughout life. Children need to be brought up participating in the everyday duties of life. This teaches them the value of doing what is necessary for daily living, including preparation of food, cleaning, and maintenance of the home environment. These activities require time and effort and are essential for health, happiness, and harmonious living. Whoever performs these necessities should be appreciated and respected for doing so. A life of ease and indulgence will only result in the child becoming self-centered, prideful, and inconsiderate. At first, children may put up some resistance at being required to fulfill any of these necessary duties, but those chores that are appropriate for their age and capability should be required for long-term development.

Participating in practical experiences is valuable in the transition from childhood to youth because this requires effort and self-discipline, which are essential ingredients for the spiritual life as well as success in all other endeavors. Abundant passages of scripture advise us about the pitfalls of laziness (Proverbs 6:9-11; 10:4-5; 10:26; 12:27) or lack of self-discipline (Proverbs 13:4; 18:9; 20:4; 21:5; 24:16). "An ordinary mind, well disciplined, will accomplish more and higher work than will the most highly educated mind and the greatest talents without self-control" (White, 1952, p. 335). Those who are learning to master the art of self-discipline are developing the necessary self-restraint and fortitude to develop their faith experience to the next level: self-sacrifice.

Common Sense and Analysis

Many parents, teachers, and educators erroneously believe that students who have professional aspirations have no need of developing practical skills. The problem with this line of thinking is that without practical hands-on experiences, individuals tend to miss opportunities that develop analytical thinking and common sense. It is difficult to express it more eloquently than the following statement from the book *Education*.

The benefit of manual training is needed also by professional men. A man may have a brilliant mind; he may be quick to catch ideas; his knowledge and skill may secure for him admission to his chosen calling; yet he may still be far from possessing a fitness for its duties. An education derived chiefly from books leads to superficial thinking. Practical work encourages close observation and independent thought.

Rightly performed, it tends to develop that practical wisdom which we call common sense. It develops ability to plan and execute, strengthens courage and perseverance, and calls for the exercise of tact and skill (White, 1903, p. 220).

The experience of hands-on activities and training provides an ideal medium for the development of a host of character qualities. Manual training, as it was once called, is valuable for rounding out character development for all classes of students. Independent thought, common sense, tact, and skill are just as valuable today as they were in the past.

Immediate Feedback

One of the most obvious reasons that the pursuit of practical skills is valuable for character development is that it provides immediate feedback on the impact of one's actions. Useful lessons about life become evident without delay, revealing the fact that the laws of cause and effect are no respecter of persons. Experiences with woodworking, gardening, or auto mechanics provide immediate feedback when things are done properly or improperly. The scratches and flaws become glaringly apparent in the woodworking project that was hurried along and not properly sanded; the plants in the garden become choked out and do not produce when the weeds are not tended; or an engine breaks down and is expensive to repair when routine maintenance is neglected. These are all lessons that are readily learned in the short term and provide insights into principles that can be applied in the long term.

A classic example of the immediate feedback from hands-on experiences took place recently with an inexperienced college student in the engine rebuilding class. This student was in the final stages of assembling a car engine and was extracting a broken bolt from its housing using a special tool called an "easy-out." The easy-out broke into pieces, so a replacement tool was found to complete the job. The broken fragments of the easy-out were not all found, but since these pieces were no longer useful, it seemed of little concern. Unbeknownst to the student, however, one large piece had dropped into a port of the intake manifold. Much later, after complete assembly and installation of the engine into the vehicle, the student started the engine. Immediately, the piece of the easy-out was sucked into a cylinder and began gouging the cylinder walls, ruining the internal parts of the engine. The engine had to be removed from the vehicle, completely disassembled, and rebuilt. The cylinders had to be re-machined, and new gasket sets were needed for the reassembly. Many hours of work and extra expense were required, all because of one seemingly insignificant piece of metal. The student had not paid attention to the instructions to cover the intake openings during assembly to avoid such a disaster. This was a valuable lesson he will never forget.

These experiences reinforce the value of respectfully following the instructions of those who are there to teach. They stimulate analytical consideration of the ramifications of apparent minor factors and events. They also provide immediate feedback of oversights and failures in very tangible ways, e.g., time and money. The additional value of these experiences is that they usually have more universal applications in life.

In the example just given, the student in the immediate situation is not the only one to benefit. Other students within that class, and many at later times, will all hear the story and appreciate the value of the experience. Students who participate in this type of activity come to appreciate the amount of labor, finances, and careful attention to detail that is required to successfully complete this type of project. We are given valuable instructions regarding the education of our youth, which suggests they should learn to become “masters rather than slaves to circumstances” (White, 1903, p. 17-18). Experiences of this nature are ideal in promoting an outlook on life that will empower students as overcomers.

Compassion and Humility

The experience of practical training and labor affords the opportunity for students to appreciate how all labor provides benefits to others. It helps them realize that, instead of seeing labor as a burden, it is a blessing, not only to others, but to those who perform it. It helps individuals learn that there is honor and opportunity for self-expression in all work. This was most eloquently stated in the book *Education*:

Such training will make the youth masters and not slaves of labor. It will lighten the lot of the hard toiler, and will ennoble even the humblest occupation. He who regards work as mere drudgery, and settles down to it with self-complacent ignorance, making no effort to improve, will find it indeed a burden. But those who recognize science in the humblest work will see in it nobility and beauty, and will take pleasure in performing it with faithfulness and efficiency. A youth so trained, whatever his calling in life, so long as it is honest, will make his position one of usefulness and honor (White, 1903, p. 222 -223).

Working with physical realities in the practice of hands-on skills continually places the individual in circumstances beyond his or her control. This often requires special adaptations that are more or less successful but brings home the lesson that we do not have absolute control and that our solutions are not always the most ideal. The best craftsmen are those who learn from their mistakes and continually strive to do better. Pride, on the other hand, does not acknowledge its failings and therefore does not leave room for improvement.

Balance

The need for balance in nature is easy to understand as we consider the value of rain, sunshine, and warm weather. The desert is a great example of a lack of balance because it provides much needed sunshine but little of anything else necessary for the growth of plant life. So it is with our lives; there must be balance in our work, in our play, and in everything else we do. Individuals who have been required to work with their hands have great opportunities to learn these lessons due to the multifaceted nature of involvement with practical applications of knowledge. For example, maintaining the engine of a car involves multiple systems and processes, each dependent on the other. Apparent minor oversights can cause huge problems when not taken into consideration. The right amount of air in a tire provides a smooth ride, while too much makes the ride rough and wears the tires unevenly; too little also wears the tires poorly and may even cause a blow-out. Working as a mechanic at times requires great force and heavy blows with a hammer and other times very light adjustments with the most delicate of instruments. It is important to know when the situation requires force or gentle coaxing. Many jobs have been made unnecessarily difficult by a lack of understanding of the right mix of soft or forceful efforts for the situation.

Years ago, when working as an automotive machinist, I was frustrated with getting a frozen bearing off of the axle. The hydraulic press did not have the power to force it off. My mentor came to my rescue and showed me how to get it off by heating the bearing race with a torch and hitting the red hot metal with a hammer. The bearing race slid off with almost no effort. These experiences serve as excellent preparation for other applications in life and enhance the understanding of balance and the proper technique.

Emergency Resources

The Apostle Paul would not have had the option of supporting himself through the craft of tent making had his family not followed the biblical practice of providing him with practical training. Paul was a member of the upper class. He did not need to work as a tent maker, but when he became an evangelist, he benefited greatly by having had this training. Now, as then, these skills can serve as a backup when other career options do not come to fruition or when a calamity comes and emergency resources are needed. Students never regret having gained skills that give them self-sufficiency, confidence, and a means to help others.

Mission Work

Those experienced in mission work appreciate the value of practical skills for either the missionaries themselves, for the people they serve, or for both. Invariably, practical skills are needed to repair or make some needed item. This often provides essential services to the mission itself or the community. A physician, who was a member of a small church, often assisted with a construction project by doing drywall taping and texture. He had an artful technique, which surprised everyone. The doctor explained that he had worked his way through college practicing that trade. This gained him a new level of respect from the church community. Regardless of the setting, practical skills are invaluable for survival and connecting with people.

The minister, the missionary, the teacher, will find their influence with the people greatly increased when it is manifest that they possess the knowledge and skill required for the practical duties of everyday life. And often the success, perhaps the very life, of the missionary depends on his knowledge of practical things. The ability to prepare food, to deal with accidents and emergencies, to treat disease, to build a house, or a church if need be - often these make all the difference between success and failure in his lifework (White, 1903, p. 221).

Conclusion

From the beginning of creation, work was an injunction by God for our wellbeing. Current research supports our essential need for work, suggesting that those who are unemployed suffer significantly higher rates of mortality, heart disease, and mental health issues (McKee-Ryan et. al., 2005). God uses manual labor as a tool for spiritual development as evidenced by the lives of numerous Bible leaders and especially by the life of Jesus. There are many perceptions of Jesus, but a complete picture of Him must include the child of the working class and a man of the trades. Many modern day educators erroneously believe that learning the skills of a trade is relegated to those who do not have the capacity for a more sophisticated education. In contrast, God demonstrated that training in the practical skills has both spiritual and earthly value. The fact that Christ appropriated the vast majority of His time on earth as a carpenter is evidence of God's endorsement of the simple life and practical skills as a means of training youth in the principles of heaven. This is validated by many biblical examples, including Noah and the ark, Abraham the shepherd, Elisha the farmer, the schools of the prophets, David and Moses (the shepherds), Paul the tentmaker, Aquila and Priscilla (also tentmakers), Dorcas the seamstress, and, of course, Christ the carpenter. Some of these examples were not discussed, but those that were provide ample evidence of God's approval of this valuable mode of education and service. The life of the Apostle Paul serves as a perfect example of how these skills can be of great benefit in an unexpected emergency, providing options to live with dignity and self-sufficiency. The importance of these skills transcends time and social class.

An education that includes practical skills is an effective tool for the development of character, which is critically important in our time and culture. Ministers, teachers, and missionaries find these skills invaluable for establishing influence and respect with the people. All students can benefit from the experience of learning practical skills regardless of their ultimate occupational interest because it promotes industriousness, self-discipline, self-sacrifice, analysis, balance, humility, and common sense. The lessons learned often provide valuable experiences that can be applied in many areas of life.

It is quite clear that Christ's time serving as a carpenter was an integral part of His ministry. "He (Christ) was doing God's service just as much when laboring at the carpenter's bench as when working miracles for the multitude" (White, 1898, p. 74). If these conditions were perfectly suited to prepare Christ for His ministry, would it not be worthwhile for us to follow that example to the greatest extent possible?

References

- Blanchard, K., & Hodges, P. (2005). *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*. Nashville: W Publishing Group
- McKee-Ryan, F., M.; Kinicki, A., J.; & Wanberg, Z., S., and C., R. (2005). Psychological and physical well-being during unemployment: A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*, (1), 53-76. DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.90.1.53.
- White, E.G. (1898). *The Desire of Ages*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- White, E.G. (1903). *Education*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- White, E.G. (1911). *Acts of the Apostles*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- White, E.G. (1952). *Christ's Object Lessons*. Review and Herald Publishing Association.
- White, E.G. (1956). *SDA Bible Commentaries Vol. 6*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association.