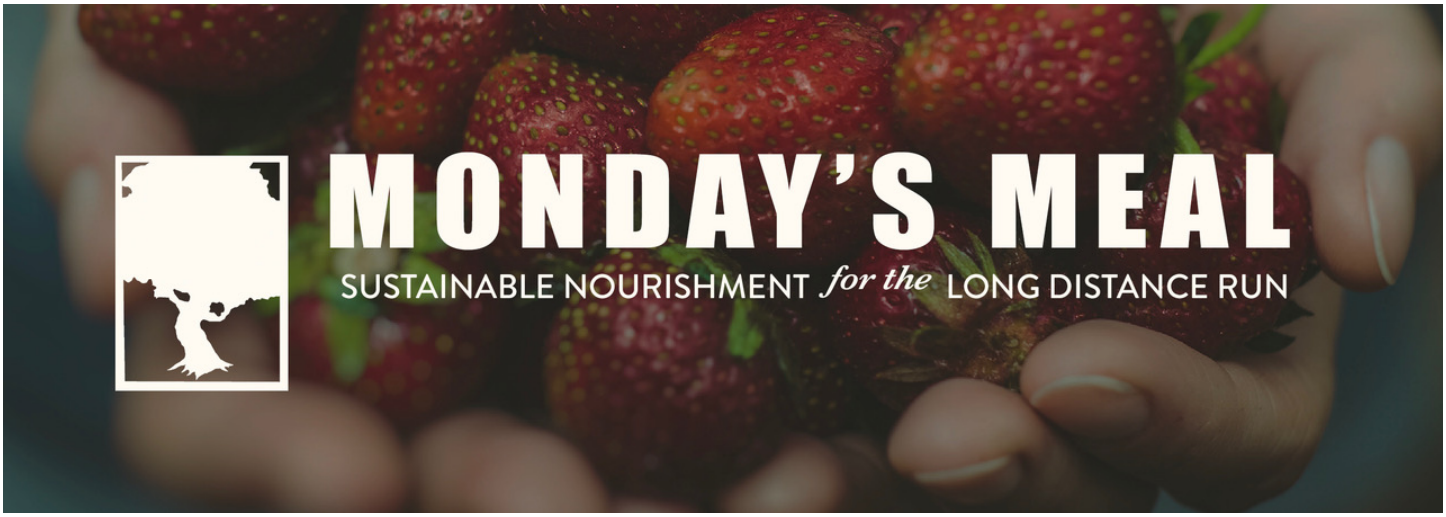

Letter to a Classical Christian Teacher

5 tactics for your classroom

by Kanaan Trotter

Monday's Meal is a service of The Oaks Classical and Christian Academy. Each meal is selected specifically to feed and nourish parents for the long distance run. If you found it helpful, consider passing it along.

"…and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds…" Hebrews 10:24

Dear Teacher,

Not many of you ought to become teachers, said the Apostle James, because you will be judged with a stricter judgment (James 3:1). This statement is not limited to a particular church office. Far too many teachers have been knocked backwards into the craft of the classroom. They are confronted by their inability to bear up under the stressors of a corporate occupation, with its rigidity and business expectations. "Accounting wasn't my thing, so I ended up teaching," these types will say. And you would be right to strip this down to what's really being said: "This is a lower stakes job that is more comfortable." Do not be tricked. Many a fool has hidden behind a podium or a pulpit.

You do not fit into this category though, for if you did it would become remarkably apparent to you just how nonsensical this occupation is. You keep the hours of a corporate vice president, receive the pay of an entry-level employee, and are given the appreciation of a janitor. Fair and equitable is the very opposite of this role's description. But here you are, still staying up to grade bad writing, and still teaching students that don't appreciate the effort.

Your job is not normal, and it's fitting to consider just how you ought to act in the face of this inherent abnormality. Here are 5 tactics to orient yourself to the nature of what you have chosen in teaching at a Christian, classical school.

1. ***The material you teach is not what you are teaching. Conduct your classroom accordingly.***

   In 5 years' time, your students will remember very little of what you cover. It will likely be 1% of everything they are taught by you. All the lesson planning, the grading, the lecturing: 1%.What does a teacher make of that? Are the late nights and after-class tutoring really worth it?

Consider that your objective is not the same as other teachers. A law professor teaches law for students to use as they become lawyers. A physics professor runs his labs so that his students might be excellent physicists. You are doing something different here, and it is significantly more important. Remember that the very framework with which you teach – Christian and classical – is built upon the understanding that 1) the Trinity has an impact on every aspect of life, and 2) there is an inherently proper structure to how students learn. Put simply, the earth is the LORD's and there is a best way to teach that to your students.

Your role is not to impress information. It is to help shape your students into people who can learn the world. The goal is not great knowledge; the goal is great understanding. This is a very crucial distinction that you are prone to miss, particularly because it is a harder thing to measure. Your goal is a student who has grasped a little more how he ought to interpret the world he inhabits both now, and beyond the classroom. If you have not accelerated him towards that end, all the knowledge possible will not prepare him for the confrontations that are sure to come.

Remember this as you walk into your classroom. Remind yourself of your goal day by day: you are not here to read great works, or study art, or make sense of geometry. Those things are the tools by which your students will develop a powerfully divine rubric for the world – that is, the rubric of God. This is what you walk into the classroom to accomplish on Monday morning. The material you teach is not what you are teaching. ***Conduct your classroom accordingly.***

2. ***Give fewer answers to your students.***

It follows from our first principle that your classroom will look and feel different than other classrooms at other schools. You are not there to give out instructions. You are there to develop souls. It is important that you remember what kind of people you are aiming to produce. The ability to see the world's structure at all times – to recognize the diamond from whatever facet you look – is not the skill of commoners. Solomon writes an entire book with this goal in mind, and Proverbs is written to a prince. Your work is the instruction of kings. This means that your classroom is the laboratory of how to discern truth and falsity, of how to bifurcate between the call of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. And the rub is that they will say similar things.

To bring your students up to this level of aptitude, it is important that you teach them how to scale the mountain. This is not the same as climbing the mountain for them. They must learn to seek the truth, not simply be handed it. It is the glory of kings to hunt out a matter (Prov 25:2). So teach them how to go hunting. Challenge them to make sense of what they interact with. Ask them the harder questions. Let them wrestle with it for more than two minutes. Perhaps more challenging: do not fill the gaps with your own filibustering.

There is a good caveat to this principle, as your students will need to learn the framework by which they can go hunting. Do not give meat out when there are no teeth to chew it. But even this should inform how you teach: you are giving the child milk so that they might become the kind of people who can consume the denser food. The framework you give – the truth you lay out – should hold up under the stress of those higher densities. So do not be phased when the classroom is silent and an answer is lacking. Prepare for those moments, and those concepts. Teach the tools to deal with those situations. ***Give fewer answers to your students.***

3. ***You are not responsible for your students' success. Stop acting like it.***
   Your students are given to you for a short time, and then they will move on. You will end up as a name to them, most likely. They may tell a story to their children from your classroom. They may call to mind something you said as they prepare for a big work event, or a small moment in their own home. But you will, in most cases, not be a presence in their life beyond this short moment. So how do you exert the most force for growth and maturation in such a period of time?

   You must acknowledge, perhaps as the onset of every year, that the good grades of your students are not the thing you aim to produce. It is important to leave this reality without any caveats, as those exceptions tend to dilute the conviction you ought to have. Your classroom is the arsenal for the fight, but you cannot fight the fight for your students. Remember this when you grade yet another failed quiz and think that you can turn this around if you exert enough energy. That is expressly not how it ought to work. You can plant the seed, fertilize it consistently, and be diligent in your weed pulling. But you cannot make it rain.

   Do not waste time worrying about this. Do not wring your hands out because the rain has not come. This does not mean you neglect the crop entirely, but do not take responsibility of the creation of rain as if you have any control over it. It will be up to your students to take ownership of the material, and it will be up to the LORD of all things to open minds and eyes. Your temptation will be to act like God. Identify that whenever it creeps in. ***You are not responsible for your students' success. Stop acting like it.***

4. ***Your difficult students are the ones you must pursue the most.***

   The first rule of weaponry is to identify who and what it is you are fighting. What good is a sword if you're up against a rifle? You must identify, then, the war you are in. As hard as it will be, the first great reality you will need to grasp is that you are not at war with that one difficult student in your class – the one who is most infuriating. He is not the problem; it is his obstinance that is the problem.

   Let us say, for example, that this student is truly out of hand. He is belligerent in class, full of poisonous talk about you to his classmates and his grades simply justify your desire to throw him out of class. Remember how Jesus Himself speaks to the demons. He is quick to cut through their noise of false praise. He is direct with His commandments, not soft and understanding to the demons – that attitude would do no good to the man being suffocated by the demon. And most importantly, He is ready to make the man whole.

   Imitate this in your classroom. Tolerate no false praise. Even the worst of students knows when to utter false compliments. Ignore it. Call out what is a lie, and love the student behind the lie. Should you be granted the full heart of that student, you will see a new person like unto the healings of the Gospels – a student set on fire by the Gospel of grace, and Paul-like in his desire to share the same hard-hitting truth.

   Like Jesus, orient your responses with this two-part view of your student in mind. You are out to reach the student that sits behind the demoniac mask. You're aiming for the soul, not just a "student." Again, this does not mean that you tolerate folly in the name of love and care. Much to the contrary. Jesus cares for the demoniacs by speaking sternly to what is sin, and speaking tenderly to the broken soul behind the sin. Look for these two areas and act accordingly: fire for what needs to be burned off, medicine for the burn. Start seeing your difficult students like this, like Sauls before becoming Pauls. It will give you vision in your task, and a roadmap for the journey. ***Your difficult students are the ones you must pursue the most.***

5. ***See your life less like an employee and more like a missionary.***

An employee, of any kind and level, is paid in accordance with the value they bring to the organization. This is the first rule of employment: the job will add a certain level of value – matched by certain compensation – to the company's success. The economic rule is simple enough, but it's important to note this is expressly not the kind of work you are engaged in. To put it bluntly: your compensation does not match the work you are doing. But this is exactly the point.

To see your work as the occupation of a typical employee is to miss not only what you are doing ontologically, but how you ought to be operating on a regular basis. Employees are incentivized to find the most time-effective solution to their problems. Your role is built upon finding the opposite: the most soul-affecting solution to a problem. You have not set out to fix the cogs in the machine; you are here to develop eternal souls. There is nothing efficient about the work you have undertaken. Quite to the contrary, you can expect a number of what might be called abuses.

Students will not appreciate the work you have put into lessons. Parents will not see or appreciate the work you put into their children (much less the lessons for their children). In fact, they will criticize you for not putting enough effort into their children when things go wrong or tests are failed. You are the first to be blamed and the last to be appreciated. And when this happens, it is a clear indication that you are doing exactly what you ought to do. Much like the Apostles, you should be ready to give thanks when these things occur. It means that you have attacked the chaos, and not simply accepted it.

Be encouraged when this kind of abuse happens. Your life is not balanced properly in the traditional scales of work and compensation. Again, if you entered into this work for a low-stakes job, get out now. You will do yourself and others more harm than good. But if you are here for the haul, see your work as the work of ministry and mission. Approach your classroom, day by day, as the battleground for molding souls. The war is long. You will lose battles. Enforcement of strict rules will not solve the problems you face. But the change you are capable of making in the lives of your students will shock you. Do not miss that. See your life less like an employee and more like a missionary.