

Free to Learn

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From at least the time of William Tyndale until today, freedom of religion has been closely linked with freedom to learn. Both in the Roman Catholic Church and the early Anglican Church, public access to learning was seriously constrained. The printing press greatly accelerated the Reformation by making the Bible widely available in local languages. As readers learned for themselves what the Bible said, church control of education diminished because public education was closely linked to Biblical understanding until the end of the 19th century.

What does the Bible have to say about “learning”? The *Old Testament* both affirms multiple approaches to learning and the value of acquiring practical knowledge rooted in the knowledge of God. Five Hebrew words are translated with the single English word “learning” (see table). Often the same words are translated also as “teaching”, underscoring the old adage that the best way to learn something is to try to teach it to someone else.

Hebrew	Root Meaning	Learn By	Modern Sense of the Word
Alaph	“Ox”	Being yoked together	<i>Learn by association with someone, such as a child with a parent.</i>
Lamad	“Shepherd’s Staff”	Prodding, goading	<i>Instruct, teach, learn</i>
Yarah	“Shoot”	Pointing toward a goal	<i>Inform, teach, instruct</i>
Shanan	“Sharpen”	Sharpening	<i>Whet, sharpen, teach diligently</i>
Yacar	“Turn”	Chastisement, turning someone back from error	<i>Bind, chasten, discipline</i>

Joseph, Bezalel and Daniel are good *Old Testament* examples of people who succeeded in positions of influence because they were gifted in worldly learning and knowledge. In each case, their practical knowledge was grounded in their faith in God. Only fools hate knowledge, says *Proverbs 1:22*, which concludes ten verses later that the complacency of fools will kill them, but whoever listens to God will dwell safely and be secure, without fear of evil.

Learning the knowledge of God takes effort. *Proverbs 2:2-12* says we need to *incline* our ears to wisdom, *apply* our hearts and *cry out* for discernment, *lifting our voices* for understanding. Wisdom bears fruit when it enters the heart. Then knowledge is pleasant to our souls and discretion will preserve us and understanding will keep us and deliver us from evil, from perverse, deceiving people. This is surely good counsel for today!

In the *New Testament*, the word *didasko* is translated “teach” and appears in various forms over 200 times, underscoring Jesus’ primary identity as Rabbi, i.e., “teacher.” A second, less common word, *manthano*, is translated “learn” and is related to the Greek word for “disciple.” The latter is rooted in the Greek word *math*, which refers to the mental effort needed to think something through. Recall the effort it took to learn math, and you’ll get the point! These *New Testament* words almost always refer to teaching and learning about the Scriptures as instructed by Jesus.

Spiritual learning presents a different kind of picture compared to learning worldly knowledge. Jesus said we have to be “converted” (literally, “turned around”) and become as little children to enter the Kingdom of God (*Matt. 18:3*). Why? Because the “natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (*1 Cor 2:14*). In *Romans 12:2*, Paul clarifies that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in order to identify the “good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” The Greek word translated as “transformed” is *metamorphoó*, from which we get “metamorphosis”—change that comes from within, exemplified vividly by a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. This is how totally we are changed when we are born again by receiving the truth of God brought by Jesus.

The unique challenge of spiritual learning can perhaps best be understood by considering what it takes to produce the “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives (*Galatians 5:22-23*): *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*

gentleness and *self-control*. We acquire these Spirit-given character traits by abiding in Christ (*John 15:4*), which means we have to keep our focus on the Lord no matter what is going on in our lives. “What would Jesus do” is a great question to ask in every circumstance. This kind of spiritual understanding usually comes just the opposite of worldly learning. To learn to love unconditionally, God often places us in situations where it is very difficult to love someone. To maintain the joy of the Lord, we may find ourselves in positions where it is supremely hard to be joyful. To be peaceful or patient, God will often place us where peace and patience can only come from our faith in Jesus and not from the people or circumstances around us. Likewise for the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, they only appear when they are needed and no person or situation can muster these spiritual qualities for us. They only come from the Spirit of God imparting these qualities into our innermost being, often to our own great surprise!

Jesus instructed us to seek the Kingdom of God first and everything else needed for success would be given to us (*Matt. 6:33*)—especially the character traits that ensure the great gain of Godliness and contentment (*1 Tim. 6:6*). What better knowledge is there?!