

How quick are you? Are you able to come up with a response when someone puts you on the spot?

I am not usually satisfied with my responses “in the moment.” I usually think of a good response a few minutes to a few hours later... way after it is possible to say anything. It is a lot easier to respond to a question or situation “out of the blue” when it is a topic on which you are comfortable. One of the side benefits of studying the Bible, doctrine, or church history is having a deep well of knowledge from which to draw.

Let me tell you a story. I grew up in the church. My parents were active in the congregation; my dad on the church board, my mom took leadership positions in the ladies' circle, taught Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. My parents made sure we attended Sunday School, youth group, and were confirmed on schedule. We said grace as a family before meals, but did not have devotions or read the Bible together. I didn't know if my parents ever prayed other than at the table. It just wasn't talked about and it never occurred to me to inquire. My parents were tough about some things though. We were not allowed to slack off Sunday School attendance after we were confirmed. When I was a junior in high school, I was attending the Iowa State Fair, looking at the displays in one of the many exhibit halls and a pair of women approached me. They asked me if I was a Christian. I responded positively. Frankly, I was hoping they would move on to some other person, but no. They said, “Oh, good. Shall we pray together?” I don't think I had ever prayed spontaneously before, and certainly not with a stranger. Normally, I would have stammered and said something irrelevant, but it just so happened that the week before in Sunday School we had gotten new Bibles. They were the Good News translation with nifty line drawings interspersed. I remembered one particular drawing caught my eye, maybe it was even the lesson that day. I am not sure, but it was Matthew 6, where Jesus was criticizing those who would make donations and to pray to impress others or call attention to themselves. He told the disciples it was better to go into a closet to pray rather than overdo it with showy prayers on the street corners. It popped into my mind right then and I was able to respond to the women, “No. Jesus taught we should pray in private.” They moved on, and I quickly went back to find my parents.

I am not really very proud of my reaction. Even then, I wished I'd had the confidence to pray with them. And now, I would criticize adults who would team up and target a teen-ager alone. I can also emphatically say, however, that I was very thankful that I had been in Sunday School that Sunday. I had something Biblical and relevant to say in the moment. That regular regimen allowed me to be quick on my feet.

Speed work is a part of a serious training regimen for long distance runners. It is not something that outsiders to the sport usually think is part of it, but the fact is, if a runner is going to be competitive, both speed and endurance are necessary. The strength to give that "burst of speed" when necessary may be the difference between a personal record and just another race. It is also true for Christians. Regular practice of the spiritual disciplines gives you the strength to keep going when the going gets hard. Having the fellowship of other believers gives you the support to motivate and sustain you for the toughest stretches of life and to celebrate with you the moments of joy and triumph. Study and attention to the details of the faith and teachings aid in you being able to respond appropriately when your faith is challenged or when you are presented with the opportunity to talk about your faith, and to share Jesus' love, hope and forgiveness with an acquaintance, friend or family member.

I hope this Lenten season is a time of growth for you, training yourself for running the whole race of life, strengthening in both endurance and speed.