

The Sunday-School Lesson.

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(Continued.)

V. THE LESSONS SHOULD BE GRADED.

1.—*The difference between Uniform Lessons and Graded Lessons.* Another point of vital importance is that the lessons should not only be educational in aim, but graded in material. By uniform lessons is meant those in which the same passage of Scripture is studied in all departments of the Sunday-school. Graded lessons are those in which each department of the Sunday-school studies such portions of Scripture as are best adapted to it. In the sense that uniform lessons are treated differently for classes of different ages, such lessons are often said to be graded. But this obscures the real meaning of the word *graded*, which is that not only methods of treatment for classes of different ages, but the subject matter studied by such classes shall be graded to meet their differing capacities and needs. It is important to keep this distinction clearly in mind. A graded system has no use for a uniform lesson for all classes, but insists on the best possible lesson for each.

2.—*Arguments in Favor of Uniform Lessons Refuted.* The principal argument in favor of uniform lessons is that of convenience. It reduces to the minimum the labor of preparing and teaching the lesson, greatly facilitates its study in teacher's meetings and other gatherings, and opens the way for comments on it in various periodicals. As developed in most of the lesson quarterlies, it is undoubtedly the easiest way of so-called Bible study ever invented. These publications as a rule neither require nor incite study. Everything being done for the scholar, he needs to do nothing for himself. That is undoubtedly the principal reason why they have such a hold on the masses. They fall in with the natural laziness of human nature. But we must remember that in this, as in other things, the easiest way is not always the best way. In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful found it easier to travel in By-path meadow than to follow the king's Highway; but they landed in Doubting Castle. There is no royal road to learning. The best results of study cannot be obtained without labor; and whoever adopts an easy way of Bible study simply because it is easy sacrifices the ends sought to the inadequacy of the means used.

The only other argument in favor of the uniform lesson is that from sentiment. It is based on the grandeur of the idea that all the world is studying the same lesson at the same time. This argument is mainly useful for oratorical display at public meetings. Practically, it is of no more consequence to any Sunday-school what lesson another school studies than it is what hymns they sing. It is, however, of much consequence to them and to the world what the educational results are of the lessons generally studied. When a college president reports that in one of his classes, most of whose members were brought up in Sunday-school, not more than one-half of Tennyson's simplest allusions to Biblical events were understood; when the lack of Biblical knowledge among young people of the church is becoming a butt of ridicule in magazines and papers; when speakers in Sunday-school and other religious assemblies can safely take a noble delight in putting their auditors to blush because of their Biblical ignorance; when the official report of a leading denominational Sunday-school lesson editor declares that the lessons he edits leave "a scholar with a fragmentary and undigested knowledge of the Bible"; it would appear as if the lessons in common use were based on wrong principles, and that all having the interests of God's kingdom at heart should do their utmost to substitute better principles in their place.

3.—*Graded Lessons the Best Educationally.*—A uniform lesson for all grades of pupils in any other study would not be thought of for a moment. Why should it be applied to Bible study? If the object of the lesson is merely to afford a text on which to base a sermonette, or to suggest a subject for discussion, there is a rational defense for a uniform lesson. But if the object of the lesson is to give instruction in the Bible, then this argument falls to the ground. It is begging the question to say that there is something in every lesson for all

ages—a loaf for adults and a crumb for children. The problem of the Sunday-school is not how something useful may be gotten out of every lesson, but how every lesson may be made to contribute in the best possible way to the Biblical instruction of the pupils.

4.—*Graded Lessons the Best for Children.*—No one will contend that the uniform lesson is the best for children, for it puts before them many lessons suitable only for adults. When the Bible is so full of topics especially suited to children, why should any of the precious Sundays of childhood be wasted on topics unsuited to them? No plea of convenience or sentiment can ever atone for the injustice done to both the children and the Bible by such a procedure.

5.—*Graded Lessons the Best for Adults.* Nor are uniform lessons much less disadvantageous to adults. Lessons laid out on the uniform plan for classes of all ages must be a series of compromises; and the lessons especially selected for the children hinder the older people from making progress in Biblical knowledge as much as those selected for the older people hinder the children. Were the Bible a small book and easily comprehended, there might be some excuse for asking adults to spend a large share of their Sundays in studying stories familiar to them from childhood. They may of course get some good from such lessons; all Scripture is precious. But when we think of the untold wealth of spiritual truth which the Bible contains—the "solid food" for "full-grown men" as well as the "milk" for babes—we see the injustice of keeping back the older classes from the study of things which they ought to know, for the mere convenience of having all study the same lesson.

6.—*Graded Lessons the Best for All.*—That a graded system will help to overcome the difficulties just mentioned is beyond dispute, for its fundamental principle is to waste no time in any grade on lessons unsuited to it, but to make the best possible use of every lesson hour by adapting its lesson materials as well as its lesson methods to the age and capacity of those using them. In this way the needs of all would be met. A perfectly graded system would include a dozen or fifteen grades, one for each year of Sunday-school life of children and young people. The time is surely coming when such a system will be in common use; when teachers will teach the same grade year by year and so become accomplished in their work; and when pupils will pass from grade to grade and from teacher on examination as they do in other schools. But that time is not yet. The intensely practical nature of Sunday-school work bids us do the best that we can now, and work toward our ideal slowly. What I advocate at the present time, then, is not an attempt to prepare or introduce a full fledged graded system at once;—that is impracticable;—but the adoption of correct principles of action, and the preparation under them of a system with the smallest possible number of grades for doing the required work reasonably well. These once established other grades will follow in the line of natural development.

7.—*The Children's Courses should be on the Stories and Great Truths of the Bible.* In outlining such a preliminary system let us begin with the children. What is there in the Bible for them? The answer is easy. It is full of stories and great simple truths about God and man and the relations between them, the knowledge of which is the birthright of every child in a Christian land. When these are carefully selected, arranged as nearly as possible in chronological order, and prepared for the children's use, we have the first course in a graded system. How rich and beautiful such a course can be made! and how intensely interesting and profitably to the children from week to week. By the time the children have finished it they will have grown out of the story age of life, and, as boys and girls, will have entered upon the intellectually acquisitive age, which, as in the day-school about other matters, should in the Sunday-schools be used to fix in mind the great facts and teachings of Biblical history and biography.

8.—*The young People's Course should be on Scripture History and Biography.* The second step in a graded system of lessons would therefore naturally be to group the stories and truths already learned into their historical connections, to fill them out with added matter,