

MONDAY MANNA

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THE POWER OF ADMITTING, 'I DON'T KNOW'

By Jim Mathis

I was at a business seminar where the instructor advised attendees to never say, "I don't know." She said a better response is, "That is a good question," or "Let me find out for you." That sounds reasonable until we realise it denies the obvious – that we really don't know everything, and sometimes it is not possible to find suitable answers to all our questions.

Since then I have noticed how many times I say, "I don't know." One morning at the tax office where I was working, the receptionist asked me why her computer said 10:30 when it was actually 9:30. I said, "I don't know." If I had been the IT person, I probably would have told her it was a good question and I would try to find the answer, especially since it might be indicating an even bigger problem. But not being a computer expert, a simple "I don't know" seemed my best response. I once had a friend who cautioned about chasing "rabbit trails," getting side-tracked by questions we did not need to answer.

Willingness to admit we don't know everything might be an indicator of wisdom. We should have a desire to learn continually; that is how we grow in every area of our lives. However, assuming every problem has an easy answer, or we should somehow know the answer to every question, is naïve.

When I was in the fifth grade, sometimes the teacher would ask the class a philosophical question, such as, "Why are we here?" I remember one of my classmates responding, "We can look it up in the encyclopedia." I suppose the student had heard all the world's knowledge was contained in those 20 volumes, and for us, it certainly looked like it. (These days we don't need encyclopedias. We can just "Google" the answer.)

Today, I know a lot of things. Time, study and experience have taught me much. I am willing to pass along anything I know to anyone willing to listen, but since I don't know everything, I am quick to admit, "I don't know." If nothing else, we can always suggest where or who someone might go to for the answer.

Sometimes admitting to ourselves, "I don't know," is a good thing in our relationship with God. We encounter a major obstacle at work, we pray about it, and then wonder how He can resolve it: "I don't know." Unexpected financial issues arise and we pray about that. How can God fix this? "I don't know," we say. And yet, He does.

The Bible is very clear on many matters, but there are things about God – and what He says in the Scriptures – that are not as easy to understand. This is why Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey wrote in their book, *In His Image*, "Jesus Christ became the visible, finite expression of the invisible, infinite, inexpressible God." We cannot understand everything about God. If we could, He wouldn't be God.

We can be like the leaders of the Old Testament city of Berea, who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what (the apostle) Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). Because as Paul wrote elsewhere, "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people" (Colossians 1:26). Our desire should be to know God as intimately as possible.

However, we must also acknowledge God's eternal truths are beyond full human understanding. This is why Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Trusting in God, in the workplace and our private lives, sometimes involves being willing to admit, "I don't know."

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

How do you feel when someone asks you a question and you have to acknowledge you do not know the answer? What is your typical response?

What is your reaction to the suggestion that instead of saying, "I don't know," replying, "That is a good question" or, "I will try to find out for you"? Have you done that? If so, what has been the result?

Considering the area of faith, and our relationship with God, how comfortable are you with admitting that in understanding His ways, often we must admit, "I don't know"?

Have you ever had a discussion with another follower of Christ, or someone who is seeking to know God, who asked a tough question? Did you simply say you did not know the answer, or did you respond in a different way?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Job 40:1

Psalm 40:5, 92:5, 145:3

Proverbs 25:2