
Sophomore

The word, sophomore, usually refers to someone who is in their second year of high school or university. It is an apt word to describe students who are at that level of learning.

When first entering university, the student is called a freshman. Freshmen are fresh and new and they are not expected to know anything. Freshmen are generally overwhelmed by their new surroundings, and it takes them a while to get their feet under them. When they return for the second year of their studies, however, they come back as experienced people. They have a full year of learning and experience to their names, and they have a tendency to think that they know everything. They are sophomores. We will get back to this in a moment. As they enter their third year, students are called juniors. This word comes from the word that gives us the word, “young.” Juniors are considered to be those who are inexperienced. And, finally, in their final year, we have seniors, and that word refers to someone who is older, and more experienced, someone who has earned the right to be respected.

But what does the word, sophomore, mean? We might be surprised to learn this term is somewhat derogatory, for it literally means, “wise fool.” The first part of the word, “sopho,” is a Greek word meaning wisdom (*philosophy = love of wisdom*), and the second part of the word, “more,” meaning fool, also comes from the Greek (*moron = fool*). A sophomore is called a wise fool, and for good reason: they have some learning and experience especially when they compare themselves to a freshman. They enter into their second year thinking that they are well advanced in their knowledge and perceive themselves to be quite qualified in their field of study. But something strange happens in that second year of study. Whereas in their freshman year most of their courses were introductory, in the second year, their courses begin to dig deeper, and as the year progresses these somewhat arrogant sophomores realize that they didn’t know as much as they thought. In fact, by the end of the year, they come to understand that there is much more learning ahead of them than behind, if they want to become truly qualified. Thus, they are ready to become juniors, perceiving themselves as young and inexperienced. They continue learning and by the time they have reached their fourth year, they have gained some expertise in their field of study and they are ready to become seniors, those who have earned respect because of their knowledge and experience.

In his poem, **A Little Learning**, 18th century poet, **Alexander Pope**, wrote the following:

“ A little learning is a dangerous thing;
drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
and drinking largely sobers us again.

(Note: the Pierian spring was a source of knowledge in Greek mythology.)

Alexander Pope is describing what educators have come to see in their students: a little bit of knowledge makes one a sophomore, someone who thinks they are learned but are, in fact, quite dangerous for they put themselves forward as experts while they are not. However, as Pope points out, if a sophomore

persists and continues to study, they can become juniors and, eventually, seniors, but only if they are willing to continue to learn.

This is also true of studying the Bible. With rapidly changing methods of learning, we are being led to drink little sips (shallow draughts), so that our thirst is somewhat quenched and our desire to drink deeply nearly disappears. Most of our Bible study includes little snippets of text followed by a few encouraging words from a devotional. Or, we might widen our intake by listening to podcasts, most of which last no more than a few minutes. (The length of podcasts is shortening as listeners tend to ignore anything that will take up too much of their time.) These methods of learning are beneficial, but we must recognize that they are just little sips from the biblical spring. We can think that because we have sipped a few mouthfuls that our knowledge is sufficient while, in reality, we are merely sophomores.

So, what is the solution? The problem with a sophomore is that they lack perspective and, thus, they become arrogant. As Pope continues his poem, he likens learning to crossing the Alps on foot. When we begin our journey, we might cross the first mountains that we see, believing we have done an incredible thing. It is only when we reach the summit that we can see that what lies ahead are more mountains, many more majestic than the one we just summited, and we realize that our journey has only just begun.

When we approach Scripture, then, it should always be with a humble attitude, for as we learn, we need to keep our eyes open to what lies ahead. We can learn a lot, and while we can be thankful for what we have already discovered, let's realize that there is so much more for us to know. We have to get past the sophomore stage, thinking that because we have taken a few sips, we don't need much more.

I find myself moving between sophomore and junior. Sometimes I am astounded by how little I know and how much there is yet for me to learn, and other times, when I forget myself, I think I've arrived. I am often humbled when I spend a little more time reading and studying, moving beyond the devotional and podcast to spend time reading and learning from someone who has spent time plumbing the depths of a particular passage of Scripture, for it is then that I discover the richness of God's Word. We all must be careful not to think like sophomores, believing we are wise but remaining fools. Our goal is to become a senior, and while we may never attain that perfectly, we can have the mindset of a junior, someone who knows enough to know that there is so much more to learn.

Pastor Gary