

## A Warning to Teachers

- James 3:1-2
- We have completed 2/5 of the book of James and it just keeps getting better. Or more challenging, depending upon your perspective. James is going to re-introduce a topic he covered in chapter 1, the use of the tongue, and make it the main topic for this third chapter. It follows logically from the last part of chapter two, because faith is evidenced by good works, and as one theologian puts it, “words are also works.” An unbridled tongue is evidence of a deceived heart, as James said in James 1:26. A person’s words reflect his character. To re-introduce the topic of the tongue, James begins with a warning to teachers. A command, actually! “Not many of you should become teachers.” Why, James? “For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Some have asked, why does he single out teachers in this exhortation about the use of the tongue? And there are a few reasons for that. We will look at them in this order, using these three words as markers for each point: Prominence, Presumption, and Punishment.
- **Prominence**
- Although the context here is clearly the pastor-teacher, or the teaching elders of the church, let me begin by saying God loves teachers. Of all kinds. There are many teachers in here, in fact every single parent is a teacher. Dads and Moms, you have tremendous influence on the students gathered around your kitchen table. And many of you are teachers in your job, whether you are teaching someone how to appraise real estate, or teaching little girls how to dance, or teaching math in a high school classroom. Some of us can point to a teacher from our high school or college days that said something one day that changed the course of our lives. No, not, “Go immediately to the principal’s office,” although I did hear that at least once in my career. But a teacher encouraged you in a career direction because of some talent or ability he or she saw in you. God loves teachers, and He has called each one of us to use words to encourage, influence, and teach others.
- Teachers were important in the life of the early church, as well, and are still so today. The church, especially the Jewish churches to whom James was writing, patterned their worship after what they had come out of, the traditions of the synagogue. The teacher in the synagogue was called “rabbi,” which literally means, “My great one” or “My master.” Rabbis were treated with the highest of respect. In fact, your duty to help the rabbi exceeded your responsibility to help your own parents. Kent Hughes writes, “Should a rabbi and one’s father and mother be captured by an enemy, duty demanded that the rabbi be ransomed first!” It was also considered honorable to take a rabbi into your home and provide for all of his needs. The first Christians took what they knew about respecting and esteeming teachers and carried that over to the local church, and to the men who taught the Word to them.
- James, you notice, did not have to tell his readers to respect their teachers. He was writing to Jewish believers. But Paul often mentioned it in his writings, probably because he was writing to Gentiles! We Gentiles simply don’t have the more than 6,000 years of training in submitting to and welcoming godly authority. To the church in Thessalonica, Paul wrote: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” (1 Thess. 5:12-13) And to Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (1 Tim. 5:17)
- Teachers were important then as they are now: because of their tremendous influence in our lives. Teachers in the church were prominent because of their calling from God to expound the truth of the Gospel to the people of God, and they were to be esteemed for that work. We have come a long way from the first church, and the respect that the elders and the pastors use to have is sometimes hard to find in churches today. There seems to be a radical extreme one way or the other and not a lot of balance. On the unhealthy respect end of the spectrum, you have pastors who are treated like kings, elevated above the flock, kept fat and happy so the church and the community will know, just by looking at the pastor and his wife, this is a healthy and growing church. Then on the unhealthy

disrespect end of the spectrum, you hear comments made in jest like the deacons praying about the pastor, "God, you keep him humble, and we'll keep him poor!" Why did this happen, and why was it beginning to happen even when James wrote this letter? Why did James have to warn that not many should become teachers? Because wherever there is a position of respect, ambition will rear its ugly head.

- **Presumption**

- Men were seeking the position instead of seeking the Lord. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others." (Matt. 23:5-6)
- The same thing has happened in the church over the years. James warns that not many should become teachers. I remember my pastor in Winston-Salem telling me, when I went to talk to him as a teenager about this stirring in my heart toward ministry, "Mark, if you can go do anything else, do it. Because vocational ministry is not for the faint of heart. It is a burden to carry that is much too hard for any man, and only the called will last. If you are not called by God, you will be able to get a job doing something else and be perfectly content. But if you are called by God to preach, nothing else will satisfy you." It will be, to use CS Lewis' words, "an inconsolable desire." Those who are not called but enter the ministry or church leadership because of personal desire or ambition do themselves and their congregations a great disservice. It is extremely dangerous for those who are not called, because even those of us who are called struggle with submitting ourselves to God and killing our pride every time we step into the pulpit to speak for God. Pride can destroy a man's soul. It is dangerous also for the church. We have spoken many times about the damage that unsound teaching and false doctrine can do to a church. Paul told Titus to shut the mouths of the empty talker and deceivers in Crete: "They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach." (Titus 1:11)
- It is a fearful thing to misguide a church. That's why James says that for teachers, there will be a stricter judgment.
- **Punishment**
- James uses the affectionate address, "my brothers," in verse 1. And he also shifts to the first person plural pronoun, "we," to include himself in the warning, and thereby giving himself a platform from which to speak to his readers. Then he says, "for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." He is reminding them of what they already know, that becoming a teacher of the church may come with a certain respect or prestige, but it also comes with a heavy and awesome responsibility. One that includes a stricter judgment.
- Why would those who teach the church be held to a stricter judgment, a higher standard? Because Jesus said, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more." (Luke 12:48) While each Christian will stand before the Bema seat of Christ on the last day, as we talked about with regard to being judged according to the law of liberty, but those who have been entrusted by Christ to teach the Word of God to the church will have a greater judgment. That's what Hebrews 13:17 says: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." I have said before that if you are a CPA, you took your exam and then you enjoyed your practice. If you are a lawyer, you took the LSATs and then you enjoyed your law practice. But if you are a minister of the Gospel, the final exam is waiting for you. The Lord will not just judge the content of our message; He will judge the conduct of our lives.
- A second reason James warns that not many should become teachers is that we are all sinners. Verse 2: For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." By the way, that man is in heaven. No one avoids sinning with his tongue. Not until heaven. What does this have to do with teachers? The very act of teaching the church opens you up to more sin and therefore more judgment. Proverbs says "In the multitude of

words, sin is not lacking." I typically preach for about 40 minutes on Sunday morning, which is about 6000 words. That's a multitude. The possibility of me saying something that is careless or sinful or offensive is always present. I pray every week that the Lord would help me, speak through me, and only allow me to speak that which honors Him, and yet I know that I am human and sinful. James knew he was as well. But listen, the stakes are much higher today. Last month there were 596 sermon downloads from Antioch's archives on Sermon Audio. In 26 states, and 17 countries, just last month. Nearly 30,000 downloads total, since we started uploading them to Sermon Audio. Now what I or others teach from this pulpit can benefit and bless people around the world, or it can confuse or even contradict the clear teaching of God's Word. That's a heavy responsibility. Paul cried out, "Who is sufficient for these things?" And the answer is, NO ONE! Paul answers his question in the next chapter of 2 Cor., where he says, "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant..." (2 Cor. 3:4-6)

- What do we do with this word today from James? Two things, at least. First, let's take very seriously the calling to be a teacher of the church. It is a calling that can only come from God, and we must respect that, and be afraid to run towards it out of ambition or any other selfish motive. Second, I hope this word today will move you to be faithful in prayer for me and for all those who stand before you to preach and teach. I know I need it.