

## **James: Warning to Aspiring Teachers**

**James 3:1-2**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to James chapter 3 as we continue through this book. In the very first chapter James spoke of trials and how the Christian would respond to them. How God uses those trials. In the end of James, chapter 1, he talked about how to tell the difference between someone who professes to be a Christian but who is not, and someone who professes to be a Christian and is, in fact, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He makes a distinction between hearers of the word only, and those who are hearers and doers, and in fact, gives three means of diagnosing one's spiritual state at the end of that great chapter.

In chapter 2 he turns to concerns about the Christian and favoritism, and the relationship between our faith, our claimed faith, and the fruit of work, or obedience, or loving action in our lives. In James chapter 3, his attention is almost wholly focused on the issue of our speech. What does our speech say about us spiritually?

Let's turn to God's holy word here in James 3 and hear that word.

"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment, for we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well."

Amen. This is God's holy word. May He add his blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we ask that by Your Spirit You would make us to be not only hearers but doers of Your word. We ask that by Your Spirit You would search our hearts out today to show us if there be any unclean thing in us. And we ask that You would use even the realization of our own sin to draw us, to drive us to Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

Now you read the sermon title, *Warning to Aspiring Teachers*, and you heard the first verse, and you were thinking to yourself, "Whew, I'm off the hook. This is for

preachers. This is for teachers. This is for Christian educators. This is for seminarians, aspiring preachers and teachers. This message isn't for me. It's for them." Not so fast. I want you to see that James' message is not only for teachers, preachers, Christian educators, those who are preparing to be teachers, aspiring to be teachers, but this message is for all of us.

In fact, I want you to see five things that James teaches even in these two small verses. I want you to see, first, why James even raises the issue of speech. Why is he talking about speech, about our talk, about the use of our tongue in James chapter 3. Secondly, I want us to see why James says what he says about teachers of the faith. Why, in talking about speech, does he turn his focus and attention on those who are called to teach the faith? Third, I want you to see what you need to realize about teachers of the faith that will impact your evaluation of them and your prayers for them. Fourth, I want you to see the significance of an enormously important passing remark that James makes at the beginning of verse 2. And fifth, I want you to see the importance of self-mastery over the tongue.

### **I. Why Christian speech is important.**

Let's look at God's word. First in verse 1: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." And then on to verse 2, "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man able to bridle the whole body as well." Why does James follow up a section on faith and works by talking about speech? James has just been talking about faith and works. We saw it last week in James 2, verses 14 to 26, and by going on to talk about speech, by going on to talk about our tongue, James is reminding us that our works are not limited to actions, they include our words, our speech. In fact, our words, our speech, are among our most important works. If *works* in James' book refers to *loving action or obedience*, that is, behavior which flows from true Christian love worked out in life practically, daily, then words are a reflection of that true Christian love. And so his follow-up to chapter 2: 14 - 16 on faith and works is natural to begin to talk about our words.

But there is an even clearer reason for the logic of James' handling the issue of speech. And you'll see it if you'll turn back to James, chapter 1, verses 26 and 27. In that section on the issue of hearing and doing the word of God, James lists three hallmarks of a truly Christian man or woman. And he lists those hallmarks in verses 26 and 27. "If anyone thinks himself to be religious and yet does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless." That's the first one. "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress," the second, "And to keep oneself unstained by the world," the third. James preoccupies himself in the rest of the letter with those three things.

Now he took theme 2 first. "Here is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God and father to visit orphans and widows in their distress." He talks about that in chapter 2. The first part of chapter 2 is about not showing favoritism towards those who are needy and poor in the congregation. The second part of chapter 2 gives us the practical illustration of not saying to our brother in need in time of distress, "O brother, be warm and be filled," and then doing nothing about it, but actually helping that brother who is in need. And so he deals with the second of the three tests, first. But when he gets to chapter 3, he goes back to the first of the three tests of true religion, the bridling of the tongue. And then he'll spend the rest of the book from the end of 3 on dealing with worldliness that was the third of the three tests. And so the logic of James dealing with the tongue is very clear.

Now of course, James is, in addressing this issue, once again plagiarizing from his older brother, Jesus. Jesus talked about this, too. In Matthew 15, verse 11, Jesus would say, "It is not what goes in a man's mouth that defiles him, it's what comes out of that mouth that defiles him because what comes out of the mouth comes out of the heart. It shows you what the heart is like." And so James is once again ripping off the teaching of Jesus. He's simply applying the truth of Jesus to us, because our speech is one of the best indications of the state of our hearts.

So, let me ask you a question. What does your speech show about the state of your heart? If that question is taken seriously, it could be a troubling question to you. Is there inappropriate anger in your speech? Is there profaneness in your speech? I don't mean cursing, though that may be a problem for some of you. I just mean worldliness in your speech. Is your speech devoid of the grace of the gospel, of the things of God? Is it profane? Is it secularized? Is your speech coarse? Is there coarseness or crudeness in your speech? Is there prevarication in your speech? Do you mislead people? Do you lie? Do you waffle? Do you gossip? Are you inappropriately critical? Are you disrespectful in your speech? Are you lewd in your speech?

James is saying that sinful speech patterns in professing Christians need to be taken as a serious sign of a need for grace. He is also saying that sinful speech patterns may well be a tip that you need the grace of Jesus for salvation. What does your speech tell you? That's the introduction to what James is going to do in most of this chapter.

But there are 4 other things that I want you to see in these two verses. Look at the first part of verse 1.

## **II. Warnings to teachers.**

Here's the second thing I want you to see. "let not many of you become

teachers." if the general subject is speech, you may be asking, why does James start with teachers? Why did he start picking on teachers? Well, the answer is fairly straightforward. Because teachers of the faith bear important duties. Their words are important. They can be used for good or for ill. And teachers of the faith are vocationally susceptible to sins of speech, and because many who aspire to be teachers stumble, and become stumbling blocks in what they teach, teachers of the faith and those who would be are beset both with special responsibilities and special dangers with regard to the use of their tongues.

You know, James' statement in verse 1 is really stunning. "Let not many of you become teachers." it's like someone standing up at the Urbana Conference with thousands of young Christians waiting to devote themselves to the service of Christ, some of them considering full time Christian ministry, some of them considering missions, at least short term. It would be like the keynote speaker standing up and saying, "I want to implore you not to become missionaries." or it would be like someone standing up at a conference for young people and say, "Please, please none of you consider going into full time Christian service." James, with what he says, really intends to shock you into reality.

But I want you to see once again he is just saying what Jesus said. You remember back in Matthew 23, verse 8, Jesus turned to His disciples once and said to them, "Don't desire to be called teacher." Why did Jesus say that to his disciples? I mean, He was going to commission them to do what? To teach the nations! So why should they not desire to be called teacher? Because in Jesus' day, to be a rabbi, to be a master, to be a teacher was honored in Israel. Moms and dads wanted their little boys to grow up to be a rabbi. It was an honored figure in society. Now, it's not that way in America today. Preachers are right behind used car salesmen in public respect. And I want to apologize to the sellers of pre-owned vehicles. But in Jesus' day there was a desire to have that public esteem from the people who were religious. They were conservative, and their culture had religion woven throughout it, and those who were teachers of religion were respected. And so Jesus says, "Don't desire to be called teacher." And James is just echoing that same sentiment here.

The words of teachers leave an indelible mark either for good or for evil. They can either strengthen the weak and mature the faithful; or they can become a stumbling block for the young and the immature Christian. Young men who appoint themselves as teachers often lead the people of God astray. Some of them apostatize. Some of them are hypercritical. Some of them teach error. It is a dangerous profession. It is beset with special responsibilities and dangers. And frankly, James' injunction here shows us why the Church needs to confirm a man's ministry and calling. This afternoon some of our elders will meet with a candidate for the ministry, and they will do their best, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to determine whether they see a call and a gift for ministry. That is one of the protections that we have, so that no one appoints himself to the office of teacher; that the people of God see the calling of God on that person's life.

Just not long ago a friend was telling me of another friend who had decided that all of the churches were wrong, so he was going to start his own, and that he planned to go to the mission field. I promise you that man will go astray. I promise you he will go astray.

### **III. Teachers will incur a stricter judgment.**

Thirdly, James goes on to say, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." What do you need to know about teachers? You need to know that they will incur a stricter judgment. James is saying here that teachers of the faith are under divine scrutiny, and they will be judged, here and hereafter, by higher standards. James just flatly says here that teachers of the faith will be held by God to higher standards. He, of course, especially means in their teaching, but this could be more broadly applied. And you know Jesus' practice shows this. How patient Jesus was with erring members of what we might call the church in his day. He was very patient with confused lay people.

But have you ever noticed how Jesus dealt with people who set themselves up as spiritual leaders? Do you remember how he dealt with a man who was known as the R. C. Sproul of Israel, Nicodemus? The story is in John chapter 3. He says to him, "You're the teacher in Israel, you're the one about whom everybody is saying, "Boy, could we go to one of those conferences by Nicodemus and learn the bible? And you don't understand this?" You remember how He speaks to the Pharisees? "You white washed tombs, you open sepulchers, you rotting corpses. Woe to you." Jesus has no time for teachers who lead the people of God astray. And James is echoing that here in James 3:1.

And this reminds us, as members of the congregation, of the importance of our scrutiny and discernment regarding teachers. You know, it blows my mind sometimes, the kinds of teachers that intelligent, competent Christians will sometimes have a great regard for. When they are teaching utter babble and foolishness, and yet somehow intelligent, competent Christians follow after them. It's mind-boggling. This passage itself is pressing us to be discerning in the teachers that we listen to.

But of course, first and foremost, James in verse 1 is showing us the higher standards whereby teachers will be judged, both here and hereafter. There's a good reason for this divine double standard for those who teach the truth. It's to protect the people of God. And so I have no time for those fallen church leaders who then turn around and whine about the fact that they are being held to a higher standard. Have they never read James 3:1? Yes, you are going to be held to a higher standard. You didn't read that when you took on this job? We're meant to be held to a higher standard.

#### **IV. All Christians are subject to failure. We are not perfect.**

Fourth, look again at verse 2. "We all stumble in many ways." What an amazing statement. I know that James is saying that sentence to set up something that he wants to say in the next sentence. I understand that. And we're going to get there. That's going to be the next point. But isn't that an amazing passing statement. In that statement, James debunks perfectionism.

What is the significance of that passing remark about stumbling? It is that it shows you that no believer is perfect. No believer is without sin. Perfection, let me put it bluntly, perfection is not the goal of the Christian life in this age. Maturity is. Perfection is not the goal of the Christian in this life, in this age, in this world. One day, we will be stood before Him perfect, faultless with exceeding joy. One day, like Him we will rise, as we sang today. But not now. Our goal here is not perfection. It is maturity. It's integrity. And James' acknowledgment in the first sentence of this verse is huge and vital. We all stumble.

We all sin. That's the statement, not only of a mature Christian, but of the Christian leader in the days of the early church that was universally acknowledged to be the most rigorous in his practice of holiness and separation from the world. He was known as an ascetic. And yet he says not "You all stumble," but "We all stumble in many ways."

Friends, those who teach that we can attain a point in this life when we are free from sin are contradicting Scripture. They are grossly erring. They are among the teachers who will incur judgment. Maturity is our goal, not perfection in this life. I remember, in the first two or three years that I was teaching at the seminary, a young couple sitting in a class, it was early on in a fall semester, I don't even remember what the class was, and I don't know why I was commenting on the truth of James, chapter 3, verse 2, but I was. And they both began to cry. And I caught that. I saw that going on, and I didn't know what that meant. And after the class they came up to speak, which was not all that uncommon, but then they said, "Could we go back to your office to talk?" That was a little uncommon. We went back there, and they began to explain. They had graduated from a Christian Bible college where the doctrine was taught that Christians could achieve perfection. They had heard the president of their college, some three years before they came to the seminary, preach a sermon in chapel in which he said that he had not sinned in three years. That immediately cast them into a crisis of faith. They wondered, "If he has not sinned for three years, perhaps we're not Christians, because we sure have." They had lacked assurance of salvation. They had gone through a long, dark night of the soul, and now they were hearing, from someone in whom they had some trust, that the Bible did not teach that we could be perfected in this life. And they said, "Could this be true? That you don't have to be perfect to be a Christian?" I said, "It is categorically true." It liberated them. Their assurance was regained.

Friends, we must be utterly realistic about the expectation of our Christian life, and the Christian lives of others. You know, I'm always finding Christians who come in disappointed about the behavior of other Christians in the church. And we are disappointed from time to time. But, my friends, it would be a heresy for us to expect the church on earth to be perfect. Jesus told you she wouldn't be. We have to be utterly realistic, not only about our own need for ongoing repentance and growth in grace, but for others' need for ongoing repentance and growth in grace. And James is teaching us here that perfection is not the goal of the church in this age. Maturity is. "We all stumble in many ways," he says.

#### **V. Mastery of the tongue will enable us to master our lives.**

But one last thing. Look at the end of verse 2. "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." Why is self-mastery of the tongue so important? Because if you can control it, you can control anything. James is saying that Christian maturity is reflected in the self-control of our speech. And self-control of our speech bodes well for the self-control of the rest of ourselves. Isn't it interesting that when Paul is trying to explain to people that they're sinners, and he's meeting resistance, "He says you're a sinner." "Well, I'm not that bad." What does Paul go to? Romans 3, verses 13 and 14. What does he go to? Speech. And at the end of that everybody goes, "Oh, O. K., I see what you're saying." And if speech tips us off to our sin, it's not surprising then, is it, that a keen mark of the reign of grace in our lives is our speech. If we can control it, we can bring every thought captive to Christ. James is saying that the control of the tongue leads to a master control over our lives and ourselves.

Now that reality presses two ways on us this morning. For Christians who are struggling in this area, the very realization that you are struggling in this area is revealing to you a deep need for the mortification of the flesh by the Holy Spirit. That will mean immersing yourself in the word of God, so that your mind is taken captive to Christ. It will also mean being dependent on the work of God's grace in you so that you grow in grace. It will mean striving against sin.

But for others of you this message is actually revealing to you that you don't know Jesus. That you have never been savingly united to him by faith. And your speech tips you off that you are a person without true religion in your heart.

But there's good news. The Savior who could give speech to the dumb can also clean the speech of the wicked. And if you will trust in Him alone for your salvation as He is offered in the gospel. He will touch your lips and make them clean just like he did Isaiah's. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, may the mind of Christ our Savior reflect itself in our

speech to your glory. In Jesus name. Amen.

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