

Teachers

James 3:1-2

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. (James 3:1-2 (ESV))

We are fortunate to have some teachers in our congregation, and others within our church families. Teaching truly is such an excellent and admirable calling and pursuit, so needed and so helpful. But according to these stern warnings, teaching is not without its difficult side, and not many people should attempt to do it.

What are the difficulties and why must we be so careful as we engage ourselves in the efforts of teaching. First, to state the obvious, teaching by its very nature, must involve at least one other person, and often several others. And that is certainly one of the first reasons for this warning. It is one thing to learn and to know about certain matters ourselves, but it is an altogether more serious matter when we endeavor to teach the things we learn to others.

As teachers, we become responsible for the things that flow out from our teaching. The information and ideas and philosophies that come forth from our mouths have power and influence, and they cause people to respond to the things they have learned from us.

And as I have mentioned often from this pulpit, all the matters of this life, whether seeming to be secular in nature or not, are ever and always “spiritual”. Everything has “spiritual” meaning and influence and consequences. And that is true whether our teaching be in what we would count as a secular setting, such as business meetings and workplace seminars, or in the classrooms of public schools and colleges, or in our teaching in church settings and seminaries. All of our words have influence and power and have “spiritual” impact and consequences.

And yes, to some degree, this warning is probably implying the need for proper training and “credentials”. But from the warnings that are given in the verses that follow, this warning has much more to do with the many twists and turns that can take place during the actual teaching process.

But before we go further and begin to dig deeper into this stern warning, may we first recognize that there is also another clearly “unspoken side” to this instruction. If “not

many people should become teachers”, then the clear implication is that “some people really should and must become teachers”. And so, you and I should not be “frightened away” from this excellent calling and gift.

I can recall when in the mid 1980’s I was sensing a strong “drawing” in my spirit towards teaching and preaching God’s word. And immediately, these very words in this verse came to my mind. And I began to experience an ongoing sense of fear about this thing that God was clearly moving me towards.

And while all venues of teaching, public education and business and others, carry with them measures of great responsibility, it is another thing altogether to stand before a group of people and declare to them “thus saith the Lord”. Because that is exactly what a person does every time that they teach a Sunday School Class or preach a sermon.

As I stand here before you each Sunday and declare to you that the words I am saying, the message I am giving, comes from God Himself, I recognize that it is no less a fearful place of responsibility than that of the “prophets of old”. Even now, after all these many years, the thought of this truth almost takes my breath away.

And then when I consider further that I put these same messages out onto the internet and many more people are hearing them and reading them, I get even more awe-filled.

And yes, I do still “fear”. And I am glad that I do, because my “fear” keeps me doing the same thing every week, and that is, I “plead” continually with the Lord to give me only His words, and His understanding of these messages that I bring to you.

But the point again, while yes, there is a stern warning being given here about few people becoming teachers, I do want to emphasize that the other side of this instruction is also true, that yes, some people should and must become teachers.

And also, may I say again, yes, while the first and most important part of this stern warning about “few people becoming teachers” is concerned directly with the teaching of the truths given here in these scriptures, this caution is also just as appropriate for those who would engage in all the many opportunities and venues of teaching, school systems, and seminars, and other settings. Because remember, everything that every teacher communicates truly is “spiritual” in nature and has power and influence and consequences, both for good and for harm, and because of that, we must all teach with great care.

And James adds the warning here at the end of this verse that God Himself will hold us personally accountable . . . “for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

And so, every teacher in every venue of life must take these warnings into their own hearts and know that God is speaking directly to them, personally. And we must all understand and accept that we will surely answer back to God for every word that comes forth from our mouths.

Another thing that I want us to consider here about teaching, is that the actual ability to teach can come to us in more than one way. For some people, perhaps most, the ability to teach and to express themselves clearly before other people seems to be an innate “skillful art”, born into their personality at birth. And so they do then become teachers, perhaps in the public-school system.

But then also, as we have learned from these scriptures, there is another level of “teaching”, an “unction” that goes beyond a person’s natural abilities. It comes as a special “Gift” from the Holy Spirit, enabling a person to know things and to say things in ways, and with power and influence, that they would not otherwise be able to do, equipping that person to then serve God through teaching and preaching these divine truths of scripture to others.

But may we also pause and recognize that there are also many very earnest men and women in our Christian churches today who attempt to teach these truths, but have no ability at all, from any source, either naturally or as a gift from the Holy Spirit. But they become teachers anyway, sometimes out of necessity, because no one else will do it. They might earnestly desire to do no harm, but they do.

The simple fact is, the only way that anyone can ever be able to take these truths of God and teach them to other people, in the way God want them to, is through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. As we have learned from the words in 1 Corinthians 2, “spiritual truths are spiritually discerned”, and they are revealed to a person by the Holy Spirit Himself. And if that is not taking place with a teacher, then those who hear the things they teach are in danger of being led astray.

As for myself, I am fully aware that I am not able to grasp the real Spiritual meaning of any of these truths well enough, through the power of my own mind. And I greatly fear the possibility that I might, at times, speak too quickly and miscellaneously offer my own personal opinion about one of these scriptures. And I desperately want only God’s explanation of these words to flow from my tongue. And because of that, I do

desperately want to yield my heart and mind to the Holy Spirit each time that I prepare and then give these teachings and these sermons to you.

So then again, what are the potential risks that God is bringing to our minds here with these words? Verses 1 and 2 again,

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. (James 3:1-2 (ESV))

As I mentioned a moment ago, while this warning should be received and heeded by anyone who would dare become a teacher, we know from the way God has worded verse 1, that James is speaking to fellow believers who will teach God's word. James here directs His words to "my brothers", which specifically denotes "brothers in Christ", "fellow believers".

And so, the warning is to us who believe. And because every believer, whether equipped with the Spiritual Gift of teaching or not, is commanded to go into all the world and preach this gospel, then we all, in that sense, become teachers during those moments. But thankfully, we know that the Holy Spirit will be faithful to equip each of us with whatever it takes of do that kind and that level of teaching.

And yes, each of us has an obligation to study and to know these scriptures, so that we can be prepared. As the Apostle Paul reminded Timothy,

15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.
(2 Timothy 2:14-17 (NASB))

And also, beyond our own preparation, God's Holy Spirit is faithful to bring His words of truth to our minds, especially when we are caught off-guard with an opportunity to witness. In Luke 12, Jesus promised,

"When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."
(Luke 12:11-12)

The warning given here in James that "not many of you should become teachers," seems to especially address those who are in capacities of responsibility and leadership within the church, and do teach as a regular involvement. And those church leaders, those teachers, those preachers must hear and heed these words carefully. As with a

particular circumstance that the Apostle Paul warned Timothy about, even well-meaning brothers in Christ can get off-course. In 2 Timothy 2, Paul reminded the young Pastor Timothy about the tendency of certain fellow church members to go astray in their opinions and teaching, there Paul named two men Hymenaeus and Philetus. Listen to that warning!

14 Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers. 15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. 16 But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene. (2 Timothy 2:14-17 (NASB))

There in Timothy's church, Hymenaeus and Philetus were teaching others that the resurrection had already taken place, and perhaps several other erroneous doctrines. And for the folks who follow after those wrong doctrines, real difficulties can follow.

In Leviticus 10, we are given a circumstance where two of the sons of Aaron, went way off-base in their behavior and offered "strange fire" before the altar of God, and they received a due penalty for their behavior. Listen!

1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.'" (Leviticus 10:1-3 (NASB))

Too often, in these days of public pressure to be tolerant and accepting of many of the corrupt ways of our culture, we as teachers and preachers, will teach and preach misguided beliefs to Sunday School classes and from the pulpit. And by our teachings, we are in danger of "offering strange fire" before the altar of God. And we must not do that! We must not do that!

And I must not do that! I must study these scriptures carefully and continually. And I must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, both as I prepare to teach and preach and as I then speak these words of truth to you. I must, as Paul admonished Timothy, "accurately handle" these words of truth. I must teach and preach the "whole council of God". Whether you want to hear it or not, whether it offends you or not, I must be faithful to teach these truths of God in exactly the way God gives them in these scriptures, and with diligence and fervor.

On last thought about this warning. These words tell us that teachers will be “judged with greater strictness”. I confess that I don’t have a good grasp on what God intends with those words, whether He is speaking about judgment during our living years or about during the eternity to come. When He gives me clarity, I’ll share it with you. But for now, just the warning should be enough to bring fear to our hearts and cause us to be very careful with our teaching.

We’ll close with these words from 2 Timothy 2.

15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. 16 But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness.

(2 Timothy 2:15-16 (NASB))