

James

A Caution to Would-be Teachers

November 20, 2011

I. Introduction

- A. **James 3:1-12** . . . Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. [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. [3] Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. [4] Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, [they] are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. [5] So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! [6] And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. [7] For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. [8] But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; [10] from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. [11] Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

- B. Prayer

II. The Weaknesses Of The Tongue – A Caution to Would-be Teachers

- A. This portion of scripture is all about the weakness of human nature in relation to the tongue. And though it refers to the tongue as if it held the power to be good or evil, we know from Christ's words and from good reasoning skills that the tongue is driven by that which is in us. In other words, the words that come out of our mouth reveal what is within us.
1. Listen to what Jesus said about the tongue to the religious leaders of His day: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. [34] You brood of vipers, **how can you, being evil, speak what is good?** For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. [35] The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil

man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. [36] But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. [37] For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (**Matthew 12:33-37**).

2. The point here is that as we examine this portion of James and talk about the tongue, we are not just talking about the words that come out of our mouth. We are, at the same time, talking about what is in our heart – because the things that come out of our mouth come from the heart. This means that if we are going to take seriously the need to change our tongue (that is, what comes out of our mouth), we must also address the matter of what is in our heart – that is, what we think about, what we long for, what we love, what we hate, what entertains us, what upsets us, what pleases us, what gives us comfort, what we laugh at, what we cry over, how highly we think of ourselves, and other such things as these. And why is this important?
 - a. Because from our heart comes the compelling motivation for an abiding and supreme love for God, love for others, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, the longing to die to self and live for God, humbling ourselves before God and man, wanting God’s will done on earth as it is done in heaven, doing our part in drawing near to God so that He will draw near to us, and other thoughts and actions that exalt God as our most precious treasure.
 - b. But it is also from our heart that comes such detestable things as evil thoughts, hatred, bitterness, immorality, impurity, evil passions, adultery, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander, gossip, deeds of coveting, greed, deceit, envy, jealously, pride, addictions of every kind, bad theology, perverting the Gospel, the cheapening of God’s grace, a tolerance of sin that makes the sinner feel safe and accepted in his sinning, and every other foolish and sinful thing that stands against the holiness and will of God.
- B. With these thoughts in mind, lets return to **James 3:1-2a . . .** Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. [2] For we all stumble in many ways.
 1. You may be thinking that this caution to would be teachers and those who are teachers in the church has nothing to do with the tongue. Not so. Those of us who teach speak an abundance of words in an effort to convey what we believe is the truth of God’s word to those who will listen. Therefore, we have an abundance of opportunities

to get into trouble with our tongue. But bear in mind, the trouble that we get into with our tongue is the result of what is in our heart, not our abundance of words. Our abundance of words merely gives added opportunities to reveal what is in our heart.

2. And so God begins with a warning to the teachers in talking to us all about the potential evils of the tongue. And I believe there are two reasons God begins with the teachers – warning them of a stricter judgment in relation to what comes out of their mouth.
 - a. First, teachers are to live what they teach and teach what they live. If they fall short here, if they teach one thing and yet choose to live another in one or more areas of life, they are not only hypocrites, they are **severally limited** in what they can teach.
 - (1) Such a teacher may be able to speak appealingly, and even entertainingly. Their teaching may be brilliant, and at the same time easy to understand. They may be highly educated in the scriptures and in theology. And they may preach marvelous sermons on how to have a good marriage, how to get along with people at work, how to live without anxiety and stress, how to study your Bible, and even how to pray.
 - (2) However, and this is a huge however, only a teacher who practices what he teaches, and in so doing continues to grow in living the Christ-like life, and continues drawing ever nearer to God so as to know God intimately, can lead you to God, himself, and to the life Christ saved you to live. Only a teacher who practices what he teaches and therefore knows God can lead you into a deeply personal and intimate relationship with God.
 - (3) Once again, teachers can only teach you what they know. And if they do not practice what they teach, they do so knowingly and deliberately, which means they are deliberately limiting the truth they can teach, and in so doing, they are needlessly harming those who listen to them. This brings judgment!
 - b. Second, teachers not only convey truth with their words, they reinforce the vital importance of living up to that truth by living up to it themselves. When a teacher does not live up to what he teaches, his example – though silent – powerfully teaches 3 things:
 - (1) that it is okay to ignore parts of God's Word, especially in relation to godly living,
 - (2) that it is acceptable, or even normal for Christians to overlook some selfishness and some known sin in their lives; or to say

it a bit differently, that hypocrisy and the practice of known sin can be treated as if it were a normal and therefore acceptable part of the Christian life,

- (3) and that Christians can practice known, unconfessed sin and still be in good stead or in good standing with God.
 - (4) Added to all this, it is my observation that given the weakness of our nature, most church attendees will take the easiest spiritual path taught or modeled – which means they will only rise to the spiritual height of the weakest leader. This is one of the reasons I believe it is so important that we remain careful about who we put up front.
3. I trust you are beginning to see why God begins this portion on the tongue with a warning to those who would be, or are teachers. This does not mean some of us cannot aspire to become a teacher, for God also says: “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do” (**I Timothy 3:1**).
- C. This idea of stricter judgment for teachers is not unique to James, it is found in other places throughout the Old and New Testament. For the sake of seeing just how seriously God means this, and for the sake of time, we will look at one Old Testament and one New Testament scripture.
- 1. **Jeremiah 14:14-16** . . . Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds. [15] Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who are prophesying in My name, although it was not I who sent them—yet they keep saying, 'There will be no sword or famine in this land'—by sword and famine those prophets shall meet their end! [16] The people also to whom they are prophesying will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; and there will be no one to bury them—neither them, nor their wives, nor their sons, nor their daughters—for I will pour out their own wickedness on them.
 - 2. **Romans 2:17-24** . . . But if you bear the name "Jew" [Christian] and rely upon the Law [Bible] and boast in God, [18] and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law [Bible], [19] and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law [Bible] the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, [21] you, therefore, who

teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? [22] You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the Law [Bible], through your breaking the Law [Bible's teaching], do you dishonor God? [24] For "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles [unbelievers] because of you," just as it is written.

D. Here is the point I have been trying to make up to now.

1. We teachers must be careful to teach the truth, and not our own opinions or even our own prejudices. In other words, we are to teach God's truth, not our own version of God's truth.
 2. We teachers must be careful to practice what we teach. When we fail, we are to humble ourselves, confess our failure, make amends, and return to practicing what we teach.
 3. Our failure as teachers not only brings judgement on us, it makes it that much easier for you, the listeners, to live hypocritical, double-minded, so-called Christian lives. Therefore, be careful about taking the role of teacher, for God will judge teachers stricter (more severely or more sternly) than He will judge those who are taught.
- E. List of other scriptures to consider: Proverbs 17:15; Isaiah 5:20-21; Jeremiah 5:30-31; Jeremiah 23:16-17,19-20; Ezekiel 3:16-21; Matthew 15:12-14; Matthew 23:1-7,11-12; I Corinthians 3:5-15; Galatians 1:8-9; I Timothy 3:1-12; II Timothy 4:1-5; Titus 1:5-9.

III. What to look for when seeking a pastor / teacher

- A. Over the years I have thought much about what happens to a church when the current pastor leaves or dies. And I have thought about this in relation to our church, because I have been the pastor here for many years.
 1. Today, I want to encourage you to think about what you will do, as individuals and as a church, when I am no longer your pastor. Who will you seek out to be your next pastor? What kind of person will you choose.
 2. And why has this been on my mind for such a long time? Because I have seen too many churches select a pastor that does them more harm than good. And because I long for you to continue going forward in the faith, to continue growing in your love for God, and to continue growing in how you apply God's truths to your life. And the reality is, the next pastor will either help you or hurt and hinder you in your spiritual growth and living.

- B. The interesting reality here is that under our system of church government – and this system is common in churches today, you will pick the next pastor of your church. And on an individual basis, you choose the pastor you want to put yourself under when you choose the church you will attend.
 - 1. Now the strength and the weakness of this system is that you will get the kind of leader you really want. So if your wants are self-interested and more worldly based than spiritually based, you will put yourself under a pastor who will serve your wants. If your wants are God directed and you long for true spiritual growth, you will put yourself under a pastor who will serve those wants.
 - 2. In my experience, this choice of a pastor can too easily go the wrong way. Therefore, I want to talk to you for the rest of the teaching time about giving serious consideration to this choosing – whenever you may face it – and come into it prepared to choose God's best.
- C. Choosing a Pastor / Teacher / Leader
 - 1. Pray, pray, pray – not just for the choice, but for yourself that God would work in you so that you would make a God-pleasing choice.
 - 2. Examine yourself to see what fleshly and worldly loves you have and what ungodly ways you have which you have not yet been willing to die to. Ask God to show you how those will affect your choice of pastor and/or church. This is as important as prayer, for as Paul says: "The time will come when church attendees will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, [4] and will turn away their ears from the truth" (**II Timothy 4:3-4a**).
 - 3. Look for a godly life, maturity in the faith, humility, and someone who is pressing forward and therefore continuing to learn, grow, and make progress in living a Christ-like life. Look for someone who regards God as the most precious treasure any of us can find and have, and who pleads with you to see God this same way.
 - 4. Look for someone who is convinced that he can only be a good pastor / teacher when he is a vessel for honor. Do not disregard the importance of spiritual gifts, education, previous experience, and practical wisdom. But do not put these before godliness as your primary reason for the choice you are making.
 - 5. Look for someone who will love God and you enough to boldly, clearly, and graciously speak the truth to you about God and about your thinking and behavior in relation to God and others.

6. Look for a student of God's word, and one who meditates on God's word and prays over God's word – seeking to know what God is saying before depending on the commentaries to find what others say God is saying.
 7. Look for someone who is free from the love of money and the need for power. If the pastor / teacher is not as eager to serve in menial ways as to lead in big ways, beware. If he trusts in the offerings rather than God to be his provider, beware. And if he pushes you to give for projects or causes that appeal more to your fleshly, worldly interests, or help him look successful, than to promoting evangelism and spiritual growth here and around the world, beware.
 8. Look for someone who sees the church as a community of believers who are to help each other live a godly life, and who encourages this in real time, not just in theory or in such a general way it doesn't really happen. Building the church together requires knowing each other pretty personally, and that kind of commitment comes from the top down.
 9. Look for someone who is willing to speak honestly about his own challenges, struggles, failures, and growth in the faith. Look for someone who speaks to and treats his wife and children well, and who has a spouse that supports his work.
 10. Beware of choosing a pastor or teacher on how good you feel when he is teaching or preaching. If you come away mostly remembering his stories and jokes, beware, for that is a sign that you have spiritually unhealthy motives and the wrong pastor. Remember, a good presenter may keep your attention and make you happy you came to listen, but that does not mean his material is spiritually profitable and beneficial to your spiritual growth and well-being.
- D. If you put yourself under him – pray, pray, pray for him!

IV. Conclusion

- A. Remember that we started today's teaching with God's caution to teachers and pastors about severer judgment – a judgment that is primarily based on what comes out of the teachers mouth and life – for what comes out does not stand alone, but represents what is in the teacher's heart.
- B. And we concluded today's teaching with my exhortation to you to give serious consideration to being prepared for selecting pastors and teachers who are approved by God and spiritually profitable for you.