

*Teachers Beware: James 3:1-2*  
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I have the difficult task this morning of standing before you and talking at some length about the need to tame the tongue. I immediately think of Proverbs 10:19, “Where words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” This makes me want to read our passage for this morning, and then sit down. And you may tell me afterwards that I should have done just that. What makes this even more difficult and uncomfortable is the fact that our passage in James 3, which we come to today, has a particular application for teachers. James 3 begins with these words: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” How do you stand up, as a teacher, and expound a passage like this? I don’t know. But, by God’s grace, I will attempt to explain these verses to us, and I trust that God will make it profitable for us all.

By the way, this is one of the beautiful things about expository preaching through books of the Bible. Because I regularly find myself with a passage of Scripture before me that I wouldn’t have chosen to preach on if I was preaching topically. And this text is a great example. I don’t think I would have been drawn to preaching on these particular verses if it wasn’t for the simple reason that we just finished James 2 and now it’s time for chapter 3.

So here we are. The title of the message this morning is: Teachers Beware! And we’ll look at verses 1-2 in James 3. This section (which extends through verse 12) teaches us about the immense power of our words.

James has already addressed the issue of speech earlier in his letter. In 1:19 he writes, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” And then 1:26 says, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” And now James comes to address this topic in more detail in chapter 3.

This topic, of course, is relevant to all of us, because we all sin with our words. But James begins with a specific application for teachers, and therefore these verses are especially relevant for those who are teachers of the Word. If you are a Sunday School teacher or one of the VBS teachers or a small group leader or you lead a Bible study of any kind, then you are a teacher. And James has some weighty things to say to us this morning. If you are not presently a teacher but you aspire to some kind of teaching role in the church, then this message is also very relevant to you, because

James wants you to consider the significance of what you aspire to do. Finally, even for those who are not in a teaching role and never will be, this message is also important for you, and for two reasons. First of all, you need to appreciate the serious nature of Christian teaching. And secondly, we all need to recognize the immense power of our words. Teacher or not, our words are powerful. And I do think the application broadens throughout these verses. In verse 1 the focus is certainly on teachers (and aspiring teachers), but then James seems to have all of us in mind as he talks in general about the tongue.

### **Teachers Beware**

I see in these verses a warning for teachers (and aspiring teachers), and then some reasons for the warning. So we'll begin with the warning that is found in the first half of verse 1. "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers . . ." This is a little bit shocking to read, because we might assume that James would encourage all of us to teach. Why is he discouraging us from teaching? Shouldn't we desire to have as many teachers as possible?

But notice that James doesn't say, "*None* of you should become teachers." He says, "*Not many* of you should become teachers." He is not trying to discourage everyone from teaching. He's not trying to dissuade those who have truly been called and gifted to teach. And therefore if God is really calling you and equipping you to teach, then you can't use this verse as an excuse.

What James is doing here, though, is raising the bar for Christian teachers. He wants us to feel the weight of this important task. And that's the effect I hope this verse will have on us. None of us should enter into the ministry of teaching God's Word in a careless way. Nobody should step into this role lightly.

When the Word of God is opened, whether it's in a corporate gathering like this or in a Kindergarten Sunday school class or in Vacation Bible School or in an informal Bible study in the workplace, the teacher of God's Word must recognize the gravity of that moment. The teacher has been given a tremendous responsibility (a very joyful responsibility, but a weighty one). And it is not to be squandered or trivialized.

Listen to how Paul viewed his teaching ministry, as he bid farewell to the Ephesian elders. He said to them in Acts 20:26, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Do see how seriously he took his ministry? He understood that if he had not been faithful in declaring to them the whole counsel of God, then he would be held responsible for their blood. Teaching God's Word is not about entertaining people or

amusing people or simply informing people. It's about declaring the whole counsel of God. It's about "guarding the good deposit entrusted to you," as Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:14. The role of teacher is so important in the life of the church, and no one should assume that role lightly.

### **Judged with Greater Strictness**

That is the warning that James gives: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers." And then he gives a ground for that warning. He gives a reason why we should be cautious in becoming teachers. The first reason he gives is found in the second half of verse 1. "for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." James includes himself in this group. He says, "*we* who teach will be judged with greater strictness." He's not pointing fingers at anyone else without applying this to himself as well. He is a teacher, and he is preaching this message to himself as much as anyone else.

The verse says, more literally, "we will receive a greater judgment." This is the only place in James where this particular word appears, but judgment was also referred to back in 2:12-13, even though it wasn't this word that was used: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." I think the statement that "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy" is helpful in understanding what James is saying in 3:1 about judgment. Just like the person who has shown no mercy will receive no mercy in the judgment, the person who assumes the role of Christian teacher and demeans that role by having an unbridled tongue will be in danger of severe judgment.

Let me try to say that more clearly, and draw from the context to explain it. The statement in 2:13 that "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy" means that the unmerciful person will be judged on the last day. Their unmerciful deeds will be evidence that they were never truly saved. And that's the whole theme of James 2:14-26. True faith will change your life. True faith will produce good works, and the good works are the evidence of faith. And if there aren't any works, then there isn't any genuine faith.

The way we use our words is a prime evidence of what is going on in our hearts. As James said in 1:26, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." In light of James 2:14-26 I think we have to understand that to be saying, Even if a person claims to be a Christian, if there's no evidence of grace in that person's speech, then their faith is a dead faith and will not save.

When we come to chapter 3 we now see that teachers have a greater responsibility for their words and will be scrutinized more closely and are therefore in danger of very severe judgment if shown to be the person who “thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue” (1:26).

Jesus chastised the scribes of His day for misusing their role. He says in Mark 12:38-40, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” The word translated “condemnation” there is the same word that James uses in 3:1. There will be great condemnation for teachers who abuse their position. They carry greater responsibility. Jesus said in Matthew 18:6, “whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Those are scary words. They impress upon us the tremendous responsibility of leading and teaching others in the Christian faith.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.” This is how James begins his discussion of the tongue. He begins by directing the topic to teachers, because teachers necessarily use many words, and those words are given a certain level of importance because of the teaching role. For everyone, but especially for teachers, it is of utmost importance to have a tight rein on the tongue. Teachers beware! First of all, because we will be judged with greater strictness.

### **We All Stumble**

Another reason why teachers should be cautious is found in verse 2. “We all stumble in many ways.” As James elaborates on the warning of verse 1 that “not many of you should become teachers,” and as he leads into the comments about our speech, he reminds us that “we ALL stumble in many ways.” This word for stumble James used in 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails (or stumbles) in one point has become accountable for all of it.” Stumbling, in both of these cases, is referring to sin. And however large or small the sin may seem in our minds, each and every sin is a violation of God’s law and it makes us accountable for the whole law. We are transgressors. We are sinners. We are guilty before God, because we all stumble. And we don’t just stumble in one or two ways, but in many ways.

Brothers and sisters, our sin is much more widespread than we can even recognize. Our sin is so pervasive and subtle and deceiving that we think to ourselves, “I’m not that bad.” We might

agree with the biblical teaching that we are sinners. We might understand the theological truth of total depravity. But very subtly in our hearts we convince ourselves that the sins we wrestle with are few and minor. Our self-justifying pride says, “Sure I’m a sinner, but at least my sin isn’t as bad as the next guy.” But James points out to us so simply and briefly, that “we all stumble in many ways.”

### **We All Stumble in Our Speech**

That simple and broad statement is part of a more specific point, namely, that we all stumble in our speech. Look at the rest of verse 2, “and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” What James is doing here is showing us the unique significance of our words. He could have simply said, “If anyone does not stumble, he is a perfect man.” But the point that he’s making here shows the profound significance of our speech. “if anyone does not stumble *in what he says*, he is a perfect man.” And then he adds this further description, “able also to bridle his whole body.” Do you see the implication of this? Your words are so important. They are so significant. They are so foundational to who you are. And they are such a clear measure of your spiritual maturity, that it can be said that the person who has perfect speech will be perfect in every other way as well. If you can bridle this one small member of your body, then you will be able to bridle everything else, too.

The converse is also true, and this is part of the point that James is making here. For the person who does not bridle his tongue, he will not be able to bridle the other members of his body either. And this is why it is so relevant to teachers. The unstated premise in the logic of these verses is that teachers are especially prone to sins of the tongue because of the nature of teaching. Teaching involves a lot of speaking, and it is not just casual conversation, but authoritative exposition of God’s Word. The teacher must remember that we all stumble in many ways, and we especially stumble in the area of our words. And since teaching involves so many words, the person who would become a teacher must give special attention to bridling the tongue.

There are a few things we should draw from this verse that apply to all of us. First, it should be a stark reminder that we are NOT perfect. When we read, “if anyone does not stumble in what he says,” we should immediately think of the many ways in which we DO stumble in what we say. Think about this for a moment. Consider this as you look into your own life, which is filled with so many words. What kinds of things are expressed in your words? Are there hateful words, bitter words, critical words, words of

slander and gossip, words of ungratefulness and complaint, filthy joking, crude comments, prideful remarks, words of self-pity?

Jesus says in Matthew 12:34, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Our words are really a reflection of our hearts. Our talk is simply the overflow of what is going in our hearts. We all stumble in many ways, and our stumbling is particularly evident in our speech. So we read verse 2 and the first thing we need to recognize is, “I am not this perfect person. I fall far short. I stumble in many ways, and I certainly stumble in the things I say.”

But then secondly we must direct our attention to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who IS perfect. He is the perfect man who never sinned in word or deed. He has never stumbled in what He says, and He also perfectly bridles His whole body. 1 Peter 2:22-25 says, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” Jesus is our perfect Savior. He committed no sin of any kind. He was sinless in His words. No deceit was found in His mouth. And even when He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten. And see what He did in the place of threatening. He “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” That is perfect trust which produces perfect actions and perfect words.

So after we look at our own sins and the various ways in which we sin with our words, we then look to Jesus Christ, whose words are sinless and perfect. And while we deserve God’s condemnation because of our sin, Jesus is the One person who lived up to God’s standard of righteousness. He is the One perfect man. The glory of the Gospel is that His perfection (His righteousness) becomes ours by faith. All who trust in Him are counted righteous—not because *we* are righteous, but because He is righteous. And by faith we are united to Him in such a way that He takes our sin and pays the penalty for our sin on the cross, and then He clothes us in His righteousness. When we read of this perfect man, we must first remember that we are not perfect. And then we ought to praise Jesus for His perfection, and thank Him for being perfect in our place.

Thirdly, once we have recognized our sin and received the forgiveness that comes through our perfect Savior, we must also seek to emulate Christ in the way we speak. Christ is our perfect example. And even though we will never attain perfection in this

life, it *is* our desire and our aim to be more and more like Jesus. In the passage I just read from 1 Peter it says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (v. 24). We must strive to be like Jesus, which will mean dying to sin and living to righteousness. We must model our lives after the life of our Savior. And this will certainly include the area of our speech. We should desire not to stumble in what we say, but to bridle the tongue and the whole body.

Next week we’ll look at the rest of this passage—at the various illustrations James uses and the additional points he makes about the tongue. From the 2 verses we’ve considered this morning I hope it’s clear that the role of teacher is a weighty one and not to be taken lightly. Our words have the potential to deeply influence the lives of others, and therefore we’re held responsible for our words. We also ought to be cautious of becoming teachers because we’re reminded that “we all stumble in many ways.” And, more specifically, we all stumble in what we say.

Being a teacher brings greater responsibility, greater accountability, greater scrutiny in the day of judgment. And being a teacher puts one in the dangerous position of routinely using this small but potentially destructive member—the tongue.

Therefore, teachers beware! All of us who teach should be very attentive to how we speak. We must exercise restraint and have a tight rein on the tongue. For those who aspire to teach, proceed with caution. Test yourself. Examine yourself. And particularly in the area of your words.

For each of us here this morning (teacher or not), we should consider verse 2 and first of all acknowledge that we are *not* perfect. We are sinners, and our sin is much worse than we think it is. But Jesus Christ *is* perfect, and He is our only hope. He is our sinless Savior. And as we repent of sins and trust in Him, we will want to be like Him. We will model our lives and our speech after Him.