

Sermon outline and notes:

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## James 3:1-2a “So You Want to Be a Teacher?”

Intro. Before we begin, I would like to see how many of you are currently teaching in some capacity in our church? How many more of you have taught at some time in the past? Of those who are not currently teaching, how many would consider teaching sometime in the future? Today’s message is especially for you.

As we move into the third chapter of James, we will see that this chapter primarily deals with the tongue. We can use our tongue for good, but it can also be used for evil. James is not introducing something new here, for he has already spoken about the tongue in the first chapter. For example, he gave us the admonition to be swift to hear and slow to speak (1:19). And then he said that a sign of true religion is that we have learned to bridle our tongues (1:26). So we need to be careful with our tongues.

Now think about this. While we are at church, who uses their tongue to do the most talking? Teachers & preachers talk the most during the 2+ hours we are here on Sunday morning. So one application that James now desires to make regarding the tongue relates to the subject of becoming a teacher in the church. Those who love to talk may have a natural tendency to volunteer to become a teacher. But James urges caution. Is a love for talking a sign that God has called you to teach & lead a class? Well I hope we will be able to answer that question by the end of the message today.

Now let’s start off by examining:

### I. THE DESIRE TO BECOME A TEACHER

James says in v.1, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers....” We infer that many of James readers wanted to be teachers in the church. In fact, the Greek can be translated, “Stop becoming many teachers....” I think it was a carryover from Jewish society. You see, among the Jews a religious teacher was often the object of great respect, and had much prominence & authority. For example, Acts 5:34 says that Gamaliel was a teacher of the law who was “held in respect by all the people.” Jewish teachers loved being called “Rabbi” and many envied the office of teacher. So among the Jews the desire for the office of teacher was prevalent. In Romans 2:19-20 Paul addressed the Jew who was “confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.”

They naturally carried this fondness for the office of teacher with them into the Christian church when they were converted. In the early church and later, men claiming to be teachers without due authority or qualification abounded, such as the Judaizers (Acts 15:24). Also, it seems that in the very early days of the Christian Church, an opportunity was given to all believers who assembled together for worship to stand on their feet and give a word of testimony or exhortation. For example, 1 Corinthians 14:26 says, “How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation....” The early church included a format that included a high level of spontaneous participation from the audience. Some would give a testimony. Some would sing. Others would

give a Scripture reading or lesson. Some would claim to have a revelation from God. Others would preach.

Now the eagerness of quite a few to speak up during the worship services led to several problems, as you can imagine. Too many would-be teachers were competing for an audience. There must have been some who got up and, instead of giving just a *word* of testimony or exhortation, gave a whole discourse, & the services went on and on. Furthermore, some of the speakers demonstrated a “showoff” attitude. Indeed, if someone gets up in the midst of the congregation for the purpose of calling attention to himself instead of to Christ, he had better keep his seat. The house of God can do without such teachers. One of the first things that we ought to watch if we desire to be teachers in the house of God is our motivation, the why of this desire. If the motive is right, God can use us whether we are well educated or not.

So it seems quite evident that in the early Jewish church, there was an abundance of people who wanted to be teachers in the church. Yet this desire to be a Christian teacher is not necessarily bad. In fact, in 1 Timothy 3:1 the apostle Paul commends those who desire to be overseers, or pastors—which primarily involves teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24). And notice that James did not say, “let not *any* of you become teachers.” No doubt he valued the teaching of God’s Word in the house of God. As in the days of the Apostle James, so today we are in desperate need of the systematic teaching of the Scriptures by Christians who seek to edify God’s people, and practice what they teach.

So what about you today? Do you have a desire to be a Christian teacher? If so, that is good. However, James makes it clear that you need to be cautious about volunteering to teach. For notice with me:

## II. THE DRAWBACKS TO BECOMING A TEACHER

No doubt there were some in the assembly James was writing to who were becoming teachers with little or no thought about the implications. They desired the prominence, authority, and honor that goes with the position of a teacher, but they gave little or no thought to the responsibility of such a position. So James warns them of the fact that the office of teacher brings with it the following drawbacks that should be fully considered:

A. Teachers Face a Greater Potential for Falling - James says in v.2, “For we all stumble in many things.” When he says “we,” who is he referring to? Well in v.1, the “we” refers to teachers. So he could be saying that even we who are Christian teachers stumble in many things. In fact, we are going to see that there are temptations & problems that especially apply to teachers & preachers. So one thing you need to realize from v.2 is the fact that teachers are certainly not immune from falling into sin.

Actually, this isn’t just a teacher problem. It is a human problem. The apostle John declared, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). Are there any exemptions from human fallibility? No. James says, “we *all* stumble.” The only exception was the Lord Jesus Christ. All other human beings, no matter how high an ecclesiastical position they hold, are sinful, fallible men. And notice that “stumble” is a present tense. He is not referring so much to the act of stumbling but the habit of stumbling. Hardly a day goes by that we do not stumble into sin.

One time a man was speaking to a group, and he asked if anyone present did not have any faults, or if anyone knew of someone who did not have faults. After a while a man raised his hand. “I admit that I have faults, but I know of someone who didn’t. My wife’s first husband

must not have had any!" But the fact is that we all have faults, and we all can fall into a sin or make mistakes.

But I have some good news. Even though the best of us stumble & fall into sin, it is great to know that our sins are covered by the blood of Christ. And 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

However, this doesn't mean that we should have a flippant attitude toward sin. Notice that James uses the word "stumble." The imagery of stumbling presupposes the picture of a rough road full of obstacles and stones over which it is easy to trip, to stumble. We can therefore arrive at the conclusion that this is not so much a willful act of stumbling but an involuntary one. The true Christian does not generally sin willfully, but is often tripped by the devil and the many temptations of this world.

We should be like the girl who was examined regarding her salvation. She said, "I don't quite know how to explain it, but I used to be a sinner running *after* sin, and now I hope I am a sinner running *from* sin." Yet even though the true Christian wants to live right, all too often will we stumble & fall into sin.

Now there are at least three areas of temptation that are especially common for teachers. You need to consider this before you become a teacher.

1. We May Stumble Due to Frequent Speaking - James says in the last of v.2, "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." He cautions against the constant danger of sinning with the tongue, a danger inseparable from the teaching profession. Teaching and being a pastor requires a good bit of talking. The more we say, the more we are likely to stumble. Someone once said we should remember that the tongue is in a wet place where we can slip easily. Being a teacher of God's Word is a dangerous occupation for anyone because of the power of the tongue to speak inappropriately, or to misrepresent Christ. Perhaps we will slip up and gossip about someone. Or we will say something hurtful, or not true. We may give an incorrect interpretation. There are many other ways we can stumble in our speech.

Now this not only serves as a warning not to be too eager to become a teacher. It should encourage us to be forgiving & tolerant toward teachers when they do slip up. Most weeks I preach or teach 4 times. In over 2 hours of public speaking each week, it is inevitable that I will slip up and say something that I shouldn't say. When it does happen, cut me some slack, "For we all stumble in many things." Don't get mad & quit church just because a preacher or teacher messes up every now & then!

We are not fallible in words only, but James declares, "For in *many things* we all stumble." Notice other opportunities for stumbling that teachers face:

2. We May Stumble Due to Spiritual Pride – There are too many proud teachers. You see, the apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." When you study & become a knowledgeable teacher, watch out! You can become puffed up with pride, especially as people complement your teaching. Pride is one of the worst sins you can stumble into.

When you are tempted to become proud as a teacher, just remember the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that day. Everyone was singing & giving praise. The donkey could have thought they were praising him. But the people were actually praising Jesus. [Illus.#C-1486]. When people complement me for a good sermon, I just remember that the praise really goes to God who has given me such a good book to preach. Furthermore, any ability I have comes from God. Though teachers are often tempted to become prideful, we really shouldn't. But it is a danger that teacher face.

Another serious concern is this:

3. We May Stumble Due to Hypocrisy – Teachers are called upon to be faithful to teach the Word of God, even those parts that we struggle with in our Christian lives. So this creates the constant danger of hypocrisy. Teachers are not only to teach by word, but also by example. Yet if you teach that you should not lie, and yet you are caught lying, what will your students think? If you teach you should worship God, but yet you do not faithfully attend the worship services, you are a hypocrite.<sup>1</sup> Becoming a teacher creates a greater opportunity to fall into the sin of hypocrisy.

There was a very well-thought of deacon who was a zealous advocate of the cause of temperance. One day he employed a carpenter to make some alterations in his living room. As he was tearing things down, he came upon a closet very nicely concealed. He was shocked when he saw a jug and tumblers reposing there in snug quarters. The carpenter, with wonder-stricken countenance, ran to the proprietor with the announcement of the discovery. As soon as the deacon heard of it, he said, “H’m! Well, I declare, that is curious, sure enough. It must be that Captain Brown left those things here when he occupied the premises thirty years ago.” “Ah, perhaps he did,” returned the discoverer; “but say, deacon, that ice in the pitcher must have been well frozen to have remained solid all this time.” The deacon was dumbfounded. There would not have been such an offense produced had he not been a deacon and posed as such a faithful advocate of temperance.

So before you become a teacher, consider the stumbling stones that are common for teachers. And let us all watch the road we travel, for it is easy even for a Christian teacher to stumble repeatedly.

Now there is another reason why you should be cautious about becoming a teacher or preacher:

B. Teachers Face Stricter Judgment – James says in v.1, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter [lit. greater] judgment.” What is this judgment of which James is speaking here? The Greek word translated “judgment” (*krima*) comes from the verb (*krinoo*) which means “to separate, to distinguish.” When God renders His judgment, He will separate those of us who have been teachers of His Word and will judge us by stricter standards than other Christians. You see, greater responsibility & greater knowledge brings greater judgment. This is true in two respects:

1. Teachers Receive Stricter Judgment from Other People – When you become a teacher, a spiritual leader of the church, people hold you to a higher standard. They expect you to practice what you teach, and they can be very hard on you if you don’t.

Yet not only will men hold you to a stricter standard of judgment, but also:

2. Teachers Receive Stricter Judgment from God - All teachers are accountable to God for what we teach, & how we live. And since we have assumed the position of leadership in the house of God, there will be a specific and greater responsibility toward God in the Day of Judgment. What a sobering consideration this is for teachers & preachers. The more we know the Scriptures, the saintlier life we are expected to live. The more we teach the written Word of God, the more like the Living Word we should become. God will separate us teachers and demand a special accounting of all that we have said and done. If every idle word will be weighed at the Judgment (Matt. 12:36ff.), how much more the utterances of the teacher? And those who do not practice what they teach and preach will certainly receive greater judgment.

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Paul said in Romans 2:21-22, “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery?”

Are we teachers going to have to give an account to God for the times that we taught without adequate preparation in study or prayer? Are we going to have to give an account for the times we failed to rightly divide the Word of truth? Are we going to be judged for the times we drove off people from the church, not because they were offended by the Word, but because *we* offended them?

Now I don't want to frighten everyone from being or becoming a teacher. Though we will be held to a higher standard, we also have the opportunity to receive great reward. Hopefully, many teachers will hear Christ say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." If our teaching is motivated by a sincere and honest love for the Lord and the edification of those who hear us, then we can welcome this judgment, for it will mean a great reward.

So because of the drawbacks associated with being a teacher, we can better understand:

### III. THE DENIAL FOR *MANY* TO BECOME TEACHERS

James tells us in v.1, "let not many of you become teachers." I believe we should put emphasis on the word "many." Not *many* should strive to be teachers of the Word of God. And notice that he is especially talking to those who have not yet become teachers. He says, "let not many of you *become* [*ginesthe*] teachers...." For the reasons given, those of you who have not yet become a Christian teacher or preacher should hesitate about asserting yourself into that office of the church.

On the other hand, there are some who are not teaching that *should* be teaching. You have the gift of teaching. You have gained knowledge of God's Word. But for some reason, you are not teaching. Don't let what James says here keep you from being a teacher. Otherwise, you could miss out on great eternal reward, & many other blessings.

Now there are several types of people who especially should *not* become teachers:

A. Those Who Lack the Gift & Calling to Teach – What God calls us to do He equips us to do. The Bible makes it clear that God calls & equips certain individuals in the church to be teachers (Romans 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28). If you do not have the gift of teaching, you probably shouldn't be teaching.

How do you know if you have the gift? The desire should be present. But you should also have the ability, as confirmed by experience. A good starting place is to be a substitute teacher. If someone keeps asking you to substitute, then consider becoming a regular teacher.

There are others who should not become teachers:

B. Those Who Lack Biblical Knowledge - First and foremost, a teacher must proclaim the Word of God. It is wrong, according to James, for a person to pretend that he is a knowledgeable teacher when he is not. Paul wrote of some false teachers in 1 Timothy 1:7 who were "desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm." Hebrews 5:12 says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." He was talking about some Christians that still do not even have a grasp of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Perhaps they *should* be teachers by now, but since they still don't know enough, they should not.

So if you are going to be a Bible teacher, you need to be willing to read & study the Word of God! A classroom is not for pooling ignorance. A teacher needs to know his or her subject matter!

Finally, there are others who should not be teachers:

C. Those Who Do Not Live by the High Standards Required of the Teacher – It is clear from v.2 that I am not talking about living a perfect life. I'm just saying that you should generally live out the principles that you teach. We must practice what we teach. If you are not willing to live an exemplary Christian life, then you shouldn't be teaching.

In the context we see that this especially has to do with our speaking. Very few Christians have allowed God to tame their tongue. One of the things you need to be teaching your pupils is how to control their tongues. If you are not doing it yourself, you will not be effective as a teacher. Teachers must practice what they teach. Think of the damage that can be done by a teacher whose spiritual life is not up to par.

And so James indicates that we should be more concerned about our fitness for teaching than with the external trappings & advantages of the office. A ready tongue without an informed mind, and a holy life will hinder rather than advance the cause of Christ.

Conclusion: So do you have a desire to become a teacher? If so, that is good. But be sure to consider the drawbacks to becoming a teacher. There are spiritual dangers associated with teaching. You will also be held to a higher standard of judgment. So I hope that if you are asked to become a teacher in this church, you will take this message to heart. Some of you should say "no." Others of you should say "yes." If God has called you & equipped you with the gift of teaching, then trust in Him to enable you to overcome the dangers associated with teaching. By His grace you can not only overcome the dangers, but you will have the opportunity to have great reward.

As we extend the invitation, there may be some who would come forward to make yourself available to become a teacher in this church, fully understanding the warnings that James gives. Perhaps you will volunteer to be added to our substitute list. We could consider starting a new S.S. class to reach a segment of people who are not currently attending Sunday School.

Some of you need to focus on the fact that "we all stumble in many things." We all have sinned against a holy God, & we need to be saved from our sins. Well, I have good news. Jesus died on the cross that you may be forgiven. Repent of your sins. Trust in Jesus as your Savior, and you will be saved. Do it today!

Sources: James Adamson, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976); Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the Old & New Testaments: James – Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975 reprint); John MacArthur, Jr., *New Man New Tongue: Study Notes on Colossians 4:2-6; James 3:1-12* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1988); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 16 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature: James* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978); Spiros Zodiatas, *The Behavior of Belief: An Exposition of James Based Upon the Original Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).