

A Stern Warning James 3:1-2

J. Vernon McGee tells the story of a man who had spent hours out on a pier fishing without any luck. As two women walked out onto the pier, he finally pulled in a fish. It wasn't a very big fish, and one of the women took it upon herself to rebuke the man for catching such a small fish telling him he should be ashamed of himself. Already discouraged by a day with only catching this small specimen that wouldn't even make a fish stick, without looking up he told the lady that maybe she was right, but if the fish had kept his mouth shut, he wouldn't have been caught.

In *Salt Cellars*, Charles Spurgeon gives us something to ponder from various Proverbs taught in different nations about the tongue.

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.
“The tongue destroys a greater hoard,”
The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”

A Persian proverb wisely saith,
“A lengthy tongue – an early death;”
Or sometimes takes this form instead,
“Don't let your tongue cut off your head.”

“The tongue can speak a word whose speed;”
The Chinese say, “outstrips the steed;”
While Arab sages this impart,
“The tongue's great storehouse is the heart.”

From Hebrew wit this maxim sprung,
“Though feet should slip, ne'er let the tongue.”
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
“Who keeps his tongue doth keep his soul.”

Over the next three weeks we'll talk about the tongue. We'll break it down into **verses 1-2**, **verses 3-8** and conclude with **verses 9-12**. Pardon the pun, but these verses have a lot to say about the tongue. In a very real sense, they speak for themselves. In the opening two verses of **James 3**, he issues a warning, something that we need to take seriously. Consider these quotes about the tongue.

“The tongue has no bones, but can break a heart.”

“It's better to bite your tongue than eat your words.”

“Never trust your tongue when your heart is bitter.”

“The wise person has long ears and a short tongue.”

“A sharp tongue and a dull mind are usually found in the same head.”

“The amazing truth about the tongue is that it takes three years to learn how to use it and a lifetime of learning when and where to use it.”

“Who cares for your beauty if your tongue is ugly.”

“A person's tongue gives you a taste of his heart.”

“The words of the tongue should have three gatekeepers: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?”

“Surely human affairs would be far happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak. But experience more than sufficiently teaches that men govern nothing with more difficulty than their tongues.”

All of us know full well and painfully so that words have consequences, whether they are spoken or written. Published in 1949, our culture is rapidly becoming what George Orwell in his book *1984* calls newspeak. We see it on the news all the time with a calculated shift in terms. You can't use those terms. You must use these terms instead. We are told what we can and cannot say. Speak the wrong thing, use the wrong term and you may incur some consequences.

We have seen in the news this past week some very inflammatory words by those in high profile positions whether in politics or sports. Their words are a call for inciting others to acts of violence. Words can shape the destiny of an individual, a family, a church, a classroom, a business, a community, a nation and one day, words will be used to shape the entire world civilization through the charisma of a one world leader. In **verse 1**, James focuses on one of those groups and issues a warning. He directs his warning here to teachers.

I. A WARNING TO TEACHERS – v. 1

Your translation may begin with the words “**my brothers**” as in the KJV. Others, like the NIV and ESV will tuck those words in the middle of the sentence. However your translation reads, James once again turns the page or changes the topic of discussion in practical Christian living. It’s his way of introducing a different subject. He ended chapter 2 talking about our works as an evidence of our faith, now he is going to talk about our words as an evidence of our faith and in this verse, he specifically targets teachers. You might ask why them? First of all, we note the caution to teachers.

A. The Caution To Teachers – v. 1a

Let me read it from the Amplified Bible: “**Not many [of you] should become teachers (self-constituted censors and reprovers of others...)**”

Greek scholar A.T. Robertson states that the literal understanding of this verse is this: “stop becoming too many teachers.”

The Greek word teacher was often used in the Gospels to refer to Rabbis and anyone else functioning in an official capacity of teaching or preaching. In **John 3** Jesus called Nicodemus a teacher of Israel (**John 3:10**). Even though Jesus had no formal training, He was referred to by others as Rabbi or teacher 31 times. For example, when Mary Magdalene realized she was talking to Christ after His resurrection, she called Him Rabbi or teacher. He called Himself teacher eight times.

Rabbis were skilled teachers and were given great honor and respect by other Jews, but Jesus rebuked them for desiring places of honor and prestige because they liked the recognition. In **Matthew 23** Jesus condemned them for loving the chief seats at banquets or in the synagogues. They loved to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. In some Jewish circles Rabbis were given greater status than one’s own parents. Even though the parents brought the person into the physical world, the Rabbi brought the person into the spiritual world to come. They even taught that if your parents and Rabbi

were captured by the enemy, the Rabbi was to be ransomed first. John MacArthur adds that Rabbis weren’t supposed to take money for their services but have another occupation to support themselves (remember Paul was a tent maker by trade), but it was considered a pious act to take a Rabbi into your home and support him in every way possible.

There were the official Rabbis, but other respected Jewish men were given the opportunity to read Scripture and then comment on that passage in the synagogue as we see Jesus doing from time to time.

It’s not evident from the text, but James most likely is referring to those who had a teaching role in the early church. He is not discouraging people from becoming teachers in the church. It is a warning to teachers to understand the grave responsibility to be a teacher and to make sure that those who believe they have the gift and calling to teach to first test their faith to ensure they are saved. He made that evident back in **James 1:26** “**If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.**”

A teacher is to accurately handle God’s Word as he not only studies it but then conveys the truth from his study. Now that doesn’t mean that only teachers can teach the Word of God. The principle from **Deuteronomy 6** is that if we have children we have been instructed to teach those in our homes using every opportunity to convey the truth about God.

But James’s point as John MacArthur writes “is that no believer should begin any form of teaching God’s Word without a deep sense of the seriousness of this responsibility. To sin with the tongue when alone or with one or two other persons is bad enough; but to sin with the tongue in public, especially while acting as a speaker for God, is immeasurably worse. Speaking for God carries with it great implications, both for good and ill.”

Scottish Reformer John Knox was so awed and burdened by the responsibility to faithfully declare God’s Word, that the first time he preached, he wept so uncontrollably that they had to escort him

from the pulpit to compose himself.

The issue at hand that James is addressing is that apparently there were a lot of believers, especially new believers, who liked the status afforded to teachers and so they declared themselves as self-appointed teachers. These new believers hadn't been saved long enough or knew doctrine well enough to teach on things they didn't really know. You can understand the inherent danger when the church allows someone new to the faith or even new to the church to begin teaching. It's all too easy to teach something doctrinally errant. It's even an inherent danger to conclude that we've been teaching long enough that we don't need to work on it or prepare much for it.

We have heard of celebrities who shortly after getting saved immediately use their status of stardom to go out and talk about their new faith only to say some things that are not theologically sound. After Paul's conversion, God took him into the wilderness for three years so he could get his Old Testament doctrine straight regarding the Messiah before he went into public ministry. If Paul who was a well-schooled Pharisee needed time to be taught, before he went out to teach, how much the rest of us?

The NIV adds a word that is assumed in the context of the passage. It's the word **"presume"**. It means to take on oneself without permission or authority and implies accepting it as true. In this case there were some who were self-appointed teachers. No one in authority gave them that responsibility or title, they just took it on themselves without going through any vetting process. Apparently, there were a number of believers who were overly anxious to speak up and show off as teachers in meetings where a lot of latitude was given to just about anyone, even strangers, who wanted their spot in the public to say something during the service. Hence the need for a caution given by James. Let me give you two reasons why this caution is importance in light of the context from **chapter 2** and here in **chapter 3**. The first is the influence of their lips.

1. Teachers influence with their lips

Teachers wield a lot of influence, especially on the very impressionable. How many of you who have raised children have heard them say "My teacher says..." and that's how it had to be done. To the impressionable mind the teacher's words are gospel. Their words often carry more weight than those of a parent.

In the last decade there has been a great exodus from evangelical churches of more than 60% of young people due to the influence of a teacher who claims that the Bible is fictitious literature, that evolution is real, that God is a figment of the imagination, that there are inconsistencies in the Bible or that science disproves faith. Because they haven't been taught to defend their faith, students assume that what they are being taught in academia must be true. The sad part is that many pulpits and even many theology professors don't believe in a literal creation as stated in **Genesis 1 and 2**. They blend it with evolution. Young people are then confused because if they are taught that if some of it is false, there must be other things that are false as well. So rather than dig to discover truth, they blindly accept what they are taught in school.

Teachers significantly influence those they teach. I was appalled when I recently heard a teacher call one of her students a moron for raising a question. What we say can lead someone else down a right path or a wrong path. Our words influence others.

Teachers in the church are necessary, but not the kind Paul spoke against.

II Timothy 4:3-4 "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

How important it is to consider the example of the Bereans in **Acts 17:11**. When they heard Paul teach, they searched the Scriptures to ensure that what he was saying was true.

Teachers influence with their lips and then they

influence with their lives.

2. Teachers influence with their lives

Whether we have ever said it or not, at times we demonstrate it in our actions. “Do as I say, not as I do.” In no uncertain terms that in itself shows just how much of an influence our lives are to others. Students watch those who teach them, whether it’s in the home, in the classroom, in the workforce, at church. If the policy says that you should wear certain personal protective equipment, but you as the manager don’t comply, what makes you think they’ll listen to you. More than likely they won’t wear it either because your actions influence them.

When we were going through driver’s ed with David, it was and is important that we obey the traffic laws because our actions will influence the kind of driver he will become.

If we don’t practice what we teach, we are hypocrites.

Warren Wiersbe warns: “Think of the damage that can be done by a teacher who is unprepared or whose spiritual life is not up to par.”

Those who teach must take seriously the influence they have on those who sit under them.

In **verse 1** James not only speaks a word of caution to teachers, but also speaks of the condemnation of teachers.

B. The Condemnation Of Teachers – v. 1b

Again, from the Amplified Bible **“for you know that we [teachers] will be judged by a higher standard and with greater severity [than other people: thus we assume the greater accountability and the more condemnation].”**

If you think it’s such a great thing being a teacher, remember that with the responsibility comes accountability. We must be careful lest we teach something that is wrong. So if we don’t want to be condemned take that responsibility seriously.

On one occasion Jesus condemned the Pharisees for

teaching that their disciples should adhere to a stricter code of Old Testament laws than even they were willing to abide by.

Walvoord and Zuck write “A teacher’s condemnation is greater because, having professed to have a clear knowledge of duty, he is all the more bound to obey it.” In the case of the Pharisees, what was good for the goose wasn’t good for the gander.

Walvoord and Zuck are saying that we demonstrate the truth of what we teach by how we live and if they don’t match, instead of hearing well done good and faithful servant our poor teaching will be met with condemnation.

I hope that doesn’t scare you away from assuming a role as a teacher here in church. It ought to humble us and challenge us to do our best no matter what age group we are teaching. If you are a teacher or you are thinking about becoming a teacher, here are several questions that might be good to ponder.

Am I continuing to learn myself? A good teacher never stops learning, learning not only more about the material you are teaching from God’s Word, but also learning how to be a better teacher. Even if you have taught for decades continue to learn.

II Timothy 2:15 “Study to show yourself approved unto God a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Has God called me to teach? Is it your spiritual gift?

The danger we face is that when there is a need for teachers we put in any warm body. That can cause more harm than good. A teacher who is called to teach will have a burning desire, a nudging by the Holy Spirit to teach. A teacher with that gift will be affirmed by leaders in the church who recognize that gift in the person.

Does my personal life match what I teach? Are there lingering or continuous sins I need to confess that otherwise make me ineffective as a teacher?

I’m not saying that we need to be perfect, but I am saying that we should be striving for godliness in our character. **Are we getting victory over sin?**

If you are a teacher, thank you. Keep striving to be better and always keep in mind the seriousness of the task in teaching as you prepare to teach others. Teaching is more than just a dissemination of right facts or truth; it is teaching in a way that transforms lives into mature Christians.

Ephesians 4:11-14

James gives a warning to teachers and then follows it up with a warning about the tongue.

II. A WARNING ABOUT THE TONGUE – v. 2

Whether you're a teacher or not we must all consider the power of the tongue. You might think that the heart is the most powerful muscle in the human body. Others include the biceps, quads and hamstring. The most powerful muscle in the body is the jaw and inserted between it is the tongue at the fifth most powerful muscle we have.

My brother has taught Anatomy and Physiology in both high school and college for 40 years. When the topic of the tongue comes up, he says it is made up of skeletal muscle, like muscle attached to the bone. He explains that it's different from the heart muscle and other smooth muscles like the muscles in the walls of the digestive organs or blood vessels. Those muscles are involuntary. They work and we don't even have to think about it. We have no control over them. The tongue on the other hand, as he tells his students, is voluntary, something we do have control over. He then takes them to these verses and talks about the tongue from a spiritual perspective that what we say is voluntary, that we have control over what comes out of the mouth. Jesus said that what comes out of the mouth in what we say is what is in the heart.

James begins **verse 2** by asking us to consider our walk.

A. Consider Our Walk – v. 2a

We've all seen it happen and probably has happened to us. We stumble. A friend of mine told me about a time he was out running. Near the end of his long run, he was tired and his toe hit a section in the sidewalk that was a bit raised. He stumbled and

rolled. He got up, dusted himself off and looked around to see if anyone had noticed. It can be embarrassing. We expect it from a toddler who is learning to walk, but when you're an adult and you stumble that's another story. We make comments like "Hey grace, walk much?" or "How was the trip?" Others are sympathetic and help us get up.

James isn't talking about stumbling in a physical sense. It's spiritual adding that we all stumble in many ways. We all stumble because of sin. We are all prone to some lapse in sin whether it be in something we say or in something we do.

Proverbs 20:9 "Who can say, 'I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin'?"

II Chronicles 6:36 "There is no man who does not sin."

I John 1:8 "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us."

One of the easiest ways to sin is with the tongue. Let me repeat what I said earlier, the tongue reveals what is in the heart. Not only should we consider our walk, but we should also consider our words.

B. Consider Our Words – v. 2b

John MacArthur calls the tongue the tattletale of the heart and discloses the real person.

Scientists maintain that once a sound wave is set in motion, it continues on a never-ending journey, and that, if we had sophisticated enough instruments, each wave could be captured and reproduced at any time. So the saying "If walls could talk" is potentially true. Someone has said that the tongue is in a wet place that can easily slip. Jesus said this: **Matthew 12:36-37 "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."**

To show us how easy it is to sin with our tongue, James lays down a challenge that if anyone can keep his tongue from sinning, that person is perfect. It doesn't mean sinless, but mature or complete – that person is a full-grown Christian.

Warren Wiersbe shares a story from a pastor friend about a woman who came to his office one day. She was a well-known gossip in the church who spent hours on the phone with anyone who would listen. One day she went to her pastor and said the Lord had convicted her of her gossip which had gotten her and others in trouble. The pastor knew she wasn't sincere because she had done that before. So he asked what she was going to do about it. She told the pastor that she wanted to put her tongue on the altar. The pastor gave her something to think about when he told her there wasn't an altar big enough.

Scripture has a lot to say about the tongue. It is called wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, contentious, sensual and vile. Someone said that with the sins that come out of the mouth, no wonder God put the tongue in a cage behind teeth, walled in by the mouth.

Proverbs 17:20 “A man of perverse heart does not prosper; he whose tongue is deceitful falls into trouble.”

Proverbs 26:28 “A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

Rabbis called the tongue an arrow vs. a sword or dagger because, like an arrow, it can wound from a great distance. **J. Vernon McGee** describes the tongue as “the most dangerous weapon in the world.”

We need to remember the words of the Psalmist who said **“Before a word is on my tongue You know it completely, O Lord.”** (Psalm 139:4)

James says that if we can control the tongue, we can control the body and if we can control the body, we can control our life. **Warren Wiersbe** comments that “The power of speech is one of the greatest powers God has given us. With it we can praise God, pray, sing, preach, witness. With it we can lie, ruin a reputation, curse, or hurt someone.”

Someone said “we are the master of the unspoken word, but the spoken word is master of us.”

There is a direct correlation to the rise of teen suicides and the increase in usage of social media platforms where cyber bullying and shaming takes place all too frequently. Kids take seriously what is said about them and are severely wounded.

Theodore Epp reminds us to “remember that the tongue speaks what is in the heart.”

As you think about the tongue, let these verses be your guide as you speak.

Psalm 34:12-13 “Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.”

Psalm 39:1 “I said, ‘I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.’”

Psalm 141:3 “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”

Pastor Kent Hughes states that “the true test of a man's spirituality is not his ability to speak, as we are apt to think, but rather his ability to bridle his tongue.”

Do you want to have control over your tongue?

Then let this closing verse be our challenge.

Psalm 19:14: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

Teachers, be careful how and what you teach. All of us, be careful how we talk. Everything we say will be tested by how we live.

Chuck Swindoll gives us a closing question to ponder: “If you say you believe like you should, why do you say the things you shouldn't?”