

JAMES 3:1, 2 THE TEACHER'S BURDEN

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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.”¹

This past week, as the chairman of our deacons and I were caring for some church business, we were approached by a man inquiring about the services of the congregation. As we talked, he began to give his particular reasons for not attending church, despite professing appreciation for both my preaching and my strong stand on the Word of God. He mentioned in particular one point of doctrine of which he emphatically declared I was in error.

I pointed him to a portion of the Word, which he abruptly dismissed by saying, “I’ve studied that, and I don’t want to talk about it.” He continued by pointing to a particular cult that does hold to his peculiar view, but stated that he would not worship with them because they were wrong on almost everything else.

The dismissive view expressed by that man is not as exceptional as one might imagine. A tendency to dismiss teachers who give their time to study of the Word is noted among the professed people of God. Presumably, this is because Christians prefer to embrace their biases rather than consider what is written in the Word. Paul spoke of a time “When people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4]. I am quite certain that the days of which the Apostle spoke are fully upon us.

In setting after setting I have been stunned to observe professed Christians who rejoice to receive the words of a teacher, until their own prejudice compels them to dismiss the teaching of the Word. An attitude of arrogance marks many, if not most, of God’s professed people so that they exalt their own bias over the teaching of the Word. Consequently, when the teacher does not pander to their own perverted tastes, these self-proclaimed moral and ethical experts search out teachers who will affirm the preconceived notions they as rebellious believers hold.

Because of the lack of reception to the teaching I have endeavoured to deliver to God’s people, I have often felt an empathy with the myth of Cassandra. You will recall that Apollo blessed Cassandra with the gift of prophecy, but because his love was unrequited, she was cursed so that her gift would not be believed by anyone who heard her speak. So it often appears that God’s people eagerly hear the preacher speak, but refuse to accept what is taught, preferring instead their own prejudices to what is taught in the Word of the Lord.

Throughout the Word of God are laments concerning the lack of reception of prophetic truth, even as the people embrace errant teaching. Long years before the Advent of the Saviour, God warned Ezekiel, “You are to [the people] like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it” [EZEKIEL 33:32]. Even the Master charged the religious people of His days in the flesh with such duplicity. “I have come in My Father’s Name, and you do not receive Me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the Only God” [JOHN 5:43]?

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False teachers would not persist among the churches of our Lord if there were no welcome extended by God's professed people. However, there are many people receptive to error. Tragically, there are a plethora of disseminators of error willing to say whatever the people wish to hear. As Jeremiah observed:

“An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule at their direction;
my people love to have it so.”

[JEREMIAH 5:30, 31]

Though James' words confront those who think to teach, they are pertinent to all who name the Name of Christ the Lord. The people of God are responsible to assess the message of those who teach and to hold them accountable. Join me, then, in exploring the teacher's burden.

THE BLESSING OF TEACHERS — Teachers are a divine gift to the churches of our Lord. God equips gifted men and appoints them to instruct His people in righteousness and godliness. Throughout the Word of God are statements attesting to the divine nature of the teaching office. One of the best-known statements must surely be that which is found in the Ephesian encyclical. “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” [EPHESIANS 4:11-14].

Establish one great truth in your mind: James is not speaking primarily of Sunday School teachers or leaders of home Bible studies who guide participants through a quarterly or other such literature. Perhaps they are included tangentially, but his focus is on those who are divinely appointed to pastoral oversight and who serve as teachers by virtue of their position within the congregation. Those who are in view in the text are the elders of the congregation.

Christians are to teach one another [COLOSSIANS 3:16], but God appoints teachers. Moreover, it would appear that those who teach are not so much taught as they are equipped through divine action. In the church, God has appointed “first apostles, second prophets, [and] third teachers” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:28]. College and seminary cannot make one a teacher, though advanced studies should polish the teachers skills. The training provided should make those who receive appointment to the teaching office more effective in fulfilling their appointment.

Those who are appointed to the pastoral office are to be “*able to teach*” [1 TIMOTHY 3:1]. The qualification of teaching ability is sufficiently vital to the pastoral office that Paul emphasises the command again in his second letter to Timothy. “The Lord's servant must ... be ... *able to teach*” [2 TIMOTHY 2:24]. Elders are to be teachers, and the elders must “hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught, so that he may be *able to give instruction in sound doctrine* and also to rebuke those who contradict it” [TITUS 1:9]. To a great degree, the selection process is carried out by those who are themselves teachers through assessment of those who sit under their ministry. Paul commanded Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be *able to teach others* also” [2 TIMOTHY 2:2].

James recognises the participation of the congregation in seeking out teachers who are appointed by and pleasing to the Master, and thus he addresses the entire congregation. Paul, however, in his instructions to Timothy and to Titus, focuses on the equipping process. Elders are responsible to be aware of God's work among those within the flock whom He wills to equip for teaching. Titus was left in Crete so that he could "appoint elders in every town" [TITUS 1:5]. Though the elders would appoint others to the teaching office, within the congregation would be men who would aspire to the office of overseer, and indeed, such an aspiration was deemed a noble desire [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:1].

In other words, God, working through the gifted men whom He has appointed, prepares yet other men to continue the ministry of teaching. The elder must always be alert to see the work of the Master expressed through those whom he teaches. However, it is not the elder alone who is assessing both the message and the messenger, for the congregation must be aware of God's work among those who share the work of the assembly with them. The congregation must assess the character of the one appointed to teach and then the message itself must be constantly assessed in light of the revealed Word of God. Thus, the membership of the Body, like Bereans, is responsible to examine the Scriptures to insure that the things taught agree with what is written [see ACTS 17:11].

Those appointed to be teachers—which is the primary labour of pastors or elders—are responsible to adhere to the old message which was given by the Master through His Apostles. The message is vital to ensure that those attending the preaching of the Word will be made sound in doctrine and so those who are drifting may be rebuked. The work of the teacher is communication—public reading of Scripture, exhortation and teaching [1 TIMOTHY 4:13]. Additionally, through what is taught and through assuming responsibility for all that is taught within the congregation, the teachers will guard the flock from error and from assault by religious frauds, whom Paul identified as "fierce wolves" [ACTS 20:29].

When teachers have performed their task according to the will of Him who appoints to this service within the churches, their ministry is a blessing to those who receive the ministry. Thus, the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians writes, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" [HEBREWS 13:7]. Teachers, appointed by God and faithful to their appointment, will bless the people; the lives of such godly teachers will prove worthy of emulation.

Happy and blessed is the church that has a teacher whom God has appointed. That congregation enjoys the blessing of Almighty God, for the members receive full knowledge of the will of God as the teacher opens the Book and declares what is written therein. The shepherd will ensure that the flock receives rich pasturage, clear water and necessary rest as they journey toward spiritual maturity. The teacher will survey the landscape, guarding against wild beasts that would seek to injure the flock, devouring the weak and running the remainder to the point of exhaustion. The wise shepherd will seek out the paths that lead to the heavenly Zion, leading the flock through rocky defiles that provide the best and most secure access to the fields of God.

THE PERIL OF FALSE TEACHERS — "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." The responsibility of teaching within the church is serious—so serious, that those who aspire to that office should give careful consideration before they continue. Tragically, modern churches have shifted their focus to credentials and connections of teachers rather than examining character and calling; but James urges, as did Paul and Peter, that churches examine the character and calling of teachers.

If the words of the Master mean anything, then those who teach bear an awesome responsibility for the welfare of those who are taught. You will remember that Jesus warned, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe 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" [MATTHEW 18:6]. The word "sin" is a Greek term from which we obtain our English word "scandal." The thought is that a believer may be caused to stumble, to deviate from following closely behind the Master. Whatever else is conveyed, it should be apparent that the Lord takes very seriously the content of the message that is taught among His churches. Thus, there is an eschatological aspect to James' words as he warns those who aspire to teach to know that they must ultimately give an accounting to the Master of the church for what is taught.

Teachers expose themselves to greater condemnation from within the congregation and from the Master of the Church, because teachers assume great responsibility within the assembly. To be certain, James implies that the world watches those who teach, holding them to a strict standard of living up to what they teach. You know very well the harm that has been done to the cause of Christ through the actions of televangelists and through the absurd statements of those who present themselves as teachers and preachers. Recently, the racist statements of the preacher of a major presidential candidate in the United States have brought great ridicule to the cause of Christ. Those racist and political statements were echoed from the same pulpit when a priest was invited to address that same congregation. Again, the world was aghast at the arrogance of what was said and at the venom which was expressed from this Christian pulpit. Despite the knowledge that the world holds preachers to a high standard, we must not miss the peril to the flock that comes from harbouring false teachers.

James may well have had in mind another warning that Jesus issued. In MATTHEW 12:36, Jesus warned, "On the day of judgement people will give account for every careless word they speak." Though there is undoubtedly a general aspect in this warning that applies to each Christian and to what is said in every conversation, I must believe that there is a specific application to all who teach, cautioning us that we who teach must bear responsibility for what we have taught the people of God. The teacher whom God has appointed, and who faithfully delivers the message of the Master from the Word of God, will ensure that the congregation is healthy and growing strong in the Faith. The self-appointed teacher cannot speak such healthful words, but only words that are detrimental to the health of the congregation. However pious the words of the self-appointed teacher appear, they are dangerous in the extreme for the flock. Ultimately, the self-appointed teacher will injure the flock rather than blessing God's people.

It has been well said that the chief punishment of the liar is not so much that he is not believed, but that he does not believe. Just so, the chief punishment of those who will not receive the clear teaching of the Word is not that they are deprived of authority, but that they will believe any authority so-called save for the authority of the Word. Before his imprisonment, the Apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" [ACTS 20:29, 30]. Paul was dismayed to witness men he labelled as "false apostles" and "deceitful workmen" who disguised themselves as "apostles of Christ" who were received among the churches [2 CORINTHIANS 11:13]. The Apostle's astonishment echoes the warning Peter wrote to believers of the Diaspora. He warned that "False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them" [2 PETER 2:1].

You will recall that Paul charged Timothy to be prepared in the conduct of his pastoral ministry to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [1 TIMOTHY 4:2]. Though teachers are not the sole means of strengthening a church, they are the most visible means by which a people are built up. Participating in the teaching ministry of the congregation, attending the services of worship and Bible studies in addition to their own study of the Word, members of the Body will be either equipped to serve or deterred from serving through what is taught. The result is dependent upon those who are permitted to teach within the congregation. Ultimately, the elders of the congregation are responsible for all that is taught within the assembly and for the welfare of those who are appointed to the Body.

The ministry of teaching is to be conducted with complete patience. In other words, the teacher must not be deterred from delivering “the whole counsel of God” [ACTS 20:27]. There is constant pressure on contemporary preachers to adopt the latest fad in order to pander to the depraved tastes of theological lightweights among the churches. The God-appointed teacher must determine that he will keep his eye fixed on the Master, the Founder and Perfecter of our Faith, employing the method that the Lord Himself has appointed to build His people.

Among the fads embraced by the churches during the past several decades is an emphasis upon what is called “worship.” The worship movement appears to be an attempt to do something for God rather than receiving what God offers. Though the use of worship teams and the singing of choruses are not necessarily evil, the temptation to substitute our personal efforts to worship rather than receiving the ministry of God through His Word is wicked. It is not what we do for God that ultimately matters, but what God does through us. The world does not care how enthusiastic we are as we perform what we call worship, but it is vitally concerned that we live as transformed people who have been in the presence of the Lord. The world needs to see that we have been with Jesus [cf. ACTS 4:13]. Whenever a congregation begins to emphasise praise music or dance as worship, depreciating the teaching of the Word, that assembly has begun to move away from fulfilling the will of God and toward exalting the worshippers.

Ultimately, a congregation that depreciates the teaching of the Word as the centre of worship will gravitate toward making their own actions central to all that is called worship. However, through the preached Word, bringing hearers back to healthy doctrine, Christ is established as the centre of all that is done in the congregation. Paul commanded his young theologian to “preach the Word,” not dance to the music. Timothy was to be prepared to “reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching,” rather than affirming them and making them feel good about themselves [see 2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

The teacher must not hesitate to reprove and rebuke as well as exhort. Reproving implies exposure of error so that the one exposed will be ashamed, whereas rebuking implies a sharp command to bring an errant individual back into line with the will of God. Indeed, the exhortation is important to encourage those who are doing right or those who have a desire to do what is right, but without the reproof or rebuke, the exhortation will be flaccid and ineffective. Through reproof, rebuking and exhorting, the preacher guards the flock from fierce wolves.

While it is popular for modern congregations to attempt to substitute a variety of means to make the Gospel relevant to modern congregations, it is nevertheless true that Jesus was introduced to Israel through preaching [see MARK 1:14, HCSB]. The Master specifically said that He came to preach [MARK 1:38]. We do no violence to the Word of God when we draw the conclusion that those who follow Jesus must also emphasise preaching and teaching. We do not reject other activities related to communicating the truths of God, but neither may we permit other activities to be substituted for teaching.

Dialogue and drama, though entertaining, are no substitute for preaching. Though such efforts may not be evil in themselves, when they displace the preached Word, they become evil. It is my considered opinion that more evil is perpetuated among the people of God by individuals who act in ignorance to promote their own talents of singing or playing instruments or dancing or acting than is perpetuated by assault from outsiders hostile to the Faith.

GUARDING THE FLOCK — “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 here states an obvious truth—all of us are subject to sinning through what we say. Sinning through speech is common to everyone—none of us are exempt. When we think of sins committed with the tongue, we think of blasphemy, slander, gossip and innuendo, or coarse language that degrades those who hear and those who resort to such speech. However, anger—especially unjustified anger—is often expressed through what is said, just as cowardice leads to expressions of denial, (sometimes it is not true that silence is golden; sometimes it can simply be yellow).

Although the words James wrote address each Christian, it should be obvious that James is especially concerned both about what is taught within the assembly and about the character of those who teach. What a teacher may say in unguarded moments can undoubtedly be serious, but what is continually communicated in ignorance or through wilful disobedience is, in James’ estimate, an issue of momentous proportions. What is taught will either expose a congregation to irreparable damage or strengthen the people to stand firm in the face of every difficulty. Therefore, James focuses the attention of those reading this letter on the maturity of the one speaking by compelling us to acknowledge that the ability to control what is said is far more difficult than controlling one’s actions. Bear in mind that it is through the exercise of control over the tongue that one demonstrates maturity. It is through knowing what is said, taking responsibility for what is said, and ensuring that what is said is in full accord with the Word that demonstrates the spiritual maturity of the speaker.

Undoubtedly, the failure to perform the difficult task of guarding the flock is one of the greatest failings of contemporary teachers; and it is this failure to guard the flock that is central to James’ warning against promoting oneself to the teaching ministry. Individuals who imagine that teaching is easy work, that everyone will love the teacher as his lips drop pleasant words, fail to understand the significance of confronting error and correcting attitudes and practises that are contrary to the Word of God. So, in avoiding the hard tasks, teachers who have appointed themselves to oversight ensure that flock is exposed to grave danger.

Guarding the flock—reproving, rebuking and exhorting—especially when it is conducted from the pulpit of the congregation, is often referred to as prophetic preaching. It is teaching that reveals the will of God to the people, calling them to submission to His will and reminding them to walk in holiness before the watching world. Guarding the flock does indeed hurt the feelings of miscreants who are exposed as wicked, but the taught Word is always intended to bring the errant into line with the will of the Master and to keep the members of the flock from straying.

Let me speak personally at this point. Every shepherd who is appointed by God to teach His people identifies with the Apostle when he writes the Christians of Corinth, “I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:2]. The teacher that is primarily concerned for his own reputation, or who is more concerned with making his listeners feel good about themselves, reveals that he knows nothing of the appointment of God to this divine office. The God-appointed teacher will sacrifice himself for the flock and will strive to deliver the full counsel of God.

Among the early churches there were not many teachers, though there does appear to have been many people who wished to enjoy the status of a teacher without the difficulties that often attend teaching. In the Roman world, as is also true in the modern world, the desire for status led people to seek ways to make themselves appear important. Teachers—especially religious teachers—enjoyed an elevated status among the Jews; and even within Greek society teachers of philosophy were well respected. In a similar manner, anyone called “teacher” among contemporary churches is virtually guaranteed a following in greater or lesser measure from within the professed people of God. Religious teachers, however inane, are sure to have some following. In this respect, the ancient situation was not so very different from our current state.

The Lord Jesus cautioned His disciples against being called “teacher,” because we Christians “have one Teacher,” and also because we “are all brothers” [MATTHEW 23:8]. James is advancing a very similar argument in cautioning against promoting oneself. The context seems to be that those who were identified as teachers among the churches had failed to deliver sound doctrine that would have corrected errant practises among the people of God.

When James wrote this letter to persecuted Christians, we can only imagine that some who promoted themselves as teachers had perpetuated a number of errors. Reading between the lines, we can see some of the errors that were being embraced. Some of the teachers were teaching and practising a shifting allegiance that permitted changing according to the pressure of the moment rather than charting and maintaining a steady course by the Word [see JAMES 1:2-8]. Some appear to have permitted surrendering to evil as a matter of expedience [see JAMES 1:9-14]. A common response to the pressures the Christians experienced was to substitute human wisdom for godly wisdom [see JAMES 1:19-25]. Religion was reduced to external deeds within the assembly rather than compassionate acts for needy members of the Body [see JAMES 1:26, 27]. Favouritism was a constant threat among these early churches [see JAMES 2:1-13], just as it continues to be a threat to the health of modern congregations. Also, James has addressed an obvious strain of antinomianism among these first assemblies [see JAMES 2:14-26]. This attitude led people to focus on their own actions rather than focusing on the grace of God.

Paul wrote Timothy about “Certain persons ... [who had] wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” [1 TIMOTHY 1:6, 7]. Apparently, these self-appointed teachers were exposing themselves to grave censure, and they were exposing the flock to grave danger. Such individuals could be said to be “instructor[s] of the foolish [and] teacher[s] of children.” The challenge to such people, puffed up with their own self-importance, could easily be “you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself” [ROMANS 2:20, 21]?

This, then, is the teacher’s burden—to instruct God’s people in the Word that He has given thereby building the flock of God, honouring Christ the Lord, and encouraging the people of God to walk in purity before the Lord. The teacher will seek to speak the truth, drawing the people of God to obey the Word of God, even while presenting the promise of life in the Beloved Son of God to all who are willing to receive that Word.

The teacher who has been appointed by Christ to shepherd the flock does not seek glory for himself, nor does he endeavour to find a better situation for himself, but he seeks Christ’s glory where God has appointed him. He sees his service as a divine appointment, accepting the hardship for the sake of the flock. Above all else, the true teacher constantly searches the Word to know the message of the Master, and then faithfully delivers that message so that the flock will be blessed with healthful words and wise instruction in righteousness. The true teacher will resist error, refusing to countenance evil for the sake of momentary freedom from conflict.

I can assure you that the teacher appointed by God understands that he is an ambassador for Christ; and though he longs to build the Body of Christ, he desires to see all who are willing to be reconciled to God. God made His Son who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God [see **2 CORINTHIANS 5:21**]. Armed with this knowledge, the teacher works together with God to appeal to all who hear the message to receive the offer of life and to fulfil the will of God through walking in righteousness.

And that is our invitation to all who share our service this day. If somehow you have never known the life that is found in Christ the Lord, our invitation is to believe the message of life, to receive the forgiveness of sin that is offered to all who willingly receive Jesus as Master of life, to accept the freedom that is ours when we are born from above and into the Family of God. The Word of God invites all who are willing to receive the life that is offered in Christ the Lord. The Word of God promises, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For it is with the heart that one believes and is declared right with God, and with the mouth that one confesses and is saved." That Word concludes with this wonderful promise, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Receive this grace; receive this life. Amen.