

LESSON FOUR

“Be Not Many of You Teachers”

Why does the Bible say, “Be not many of you teachers” (James 3:1)? Most of us are familiar with this passage, but few of us have taken the time to really think about it. It is strange that that should be the case in a class of those who are or who would be teachers. Have we not been taught all of our lives to look for, listen to, and heed warnings? This statement is a warning. It is not intended to discourage and hinder. It is similar to a “winding road” sign. It is there to tell us that the road ahead requires special attention and care, and that failure to conduct ourselves accordingly can result in fatal consequences for ourselves and others.

This is one of the most extensive confrontations in James’ entire letter. He was addressing his “brothers” in the faith and offered one of the most note-worthy bits of advice in the entire New Testament. He admonished them to limit the number of teachers in their midst. Self-limitations should be established. To be a teacher within the church is something for which one is recognized; it requires mastering the Scriptures and their application to faith and life.

The wording is exact; μή does not precede the verb but precedes πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι and thus shows that while some must of necessity assume the responsibility, many others should not do so. Not many should be teachers and even fewer should fill the pulpit.

The warning is parallel to that of our Lord in Matt. 23:8, *seq.*, “Be not ye called Rabbi; for one is your Teacher [διδάσκαλος, and not, as Textus Receptus, καθηγητής], and all ye are brethren.” The readiness of the Jews to

take upon themselves the office of teachers¹ and to set up as “guides of the blind, teachers of bribes,’ etc., is alluded to by Paul in Rom. 2:17-24, and such a passage as 1 Cor. 14:26 ff. denotes not merely the presence of a similar tendency among Christians, but also the opportunity given for its exercise in the Church.”²

“James makes the reason for the warning clear. **Knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment** (ληψόμεθα). By the use of the first person, James includes himself, thus giving a remarkable proof of humility. (The Vulgate, missing this, has wrongly *sumitis*.) Comp. vv. 2, 9, where also he uses the first person, with great delicacy of feeling not separating himself from those whose conduct he denounces. Μείζον κρίμα. The form of expression recalls our Lord’s saying of the Pharisees, “These shall receive greater condemnation (περισσότερον κρίμα)” (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47).³

The evil referred to is that where *many* desired to be teachers, *few* could be qualified for the office, and comparatively few were required. A small number, well qualified, would better discharge the duties of the office, and do more good, than many would; and there would be great evil in having many crowding themselves unqualified into the office. The word here

¹ “However, even the Jews had warnings about the dangers teachers faced: the teachers, Rabbis; see above, 1:4. To expound Torah wrongly is to promote the transgression of its precepts. If, as the divine retribution for doing so, a teacher is exiled to a place of **evil waters**, i.e. a place where there is no sound teaching of Torah, he may perpetuate his error, so that those who **come after**, i.e. learn from him, may **drink**, i.e. receive his teaching, and **die**, i.e. fall into sin for which death is the divine punishment. In that case, it will **be found**, i.e. it will result, that the name of God has been **profaned**.”

Commentary on the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Pirke Aboth 1.11 (“Sayings of the Jewish Fathers”).

² *The Pulpit Commentary: James*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (42). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

³ *The Pulpit Commentary: James*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (42). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

rendered *masters* (διδάσκαλοι) should have been rendered *teachers*. It is so rendered in John 3:2; Acts 13:1; Rom. 2:20; 1 Cor. 12:28, 29; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 2:11; 4:3; Heb. 5:12; though it is elsewhere frequently rendered *master*. It has, however, in it primarily the notion of *teaching* (διδάσκω), even when rendered *master*; and the word *master* is often used in the New Testament, as it is with us, to denote an *instructor*—as the ‘school-master.’ Comp. Matt. 10:24, 25; 22:16; Mark 10:17; 12:19, *et al.* The word is not properly used in the sense of *master*, as distinguished from *a servant*, but as distinguished from *a disciple* or *learner*. Such a position, indeed, implies *authority*, but it is authority based not on power, but on superior qualifications. The connection implies that the word is used in that sense in this place; and the evil reprehended is that of seeking the office of public instructor, especially the sacred office. It would seem that this was a prevailing fault among those to whom James wrote. This desire was common among the Jewish people, who coveted the name and the office of *Rabbi*, equivalent to that here used, (comp. Matt. 23:7), and who were ambitious to be doctors and teachers. See Rom. 2:19; 1 Tim. 1:7. This fondness for the office of teachers they naturally carried with them into the Christian church when they were converted, and it is this that James here rebukes. ‘The same spirit the passage before us would also rebuke now, and for the same reasons; for although a man should be willing to become a public instructor of the Scripture, and should esteem it a privilege when the opportunity arises, yet there would be scarcely any thing more injurious to the cause of Christ, or that would tend more to produce disorder and confusion, than one’s seeking the prominence and importance that one has by virtue of being a public instructor while being unqualified to be and unwilling to study to become qualified to be a teacher of the Word. If there is any thing that ought to be

managed with extreme prudence and caution, it is introducing one into the service of public teaching. Comp. 1 Tim. 5:22.

Knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation, (μείζον κριμα). Or rather, *a severer judgment*; that is, we shall have a severer trial, and give a stricter account. The word here used does not necessarily mean *condemnation*, but *judgment, trial, account*; and the consideration which the apostle suggests is not that those who were public teachers would be *condemned*, but that there would be a much more solemn account to be rendered by them than by others, and that they ought duly to reflect on that in seeking the position of teaching. James would carry them in anticipation before the judgment-seat, and have them determine the question of becoming a teacher there. No better ‘stand-point’ can be taken in making up the mind in regard to this work; and if that had been the position assumed in order to estimate the work, and to make up the mind in regard to the choice of this service, many a one who has sought the office would have been deterred from it; and it may be added, also, that many a pious and Bible-educated youth *would* have sought the office. One who is about to make a choice of becoming a teacher, should go by anticipation to the judgment-bar of Christ, and ask, “Am I willing to work and sacrifice in order to reach that goal?” If *that* were the point of view taken, how many would have been deterred from teaching who have sought it with a view to the honor and praise they could receive! How many, too, who would have devoted themselves to teaching of the Word, had they determined whether their duty was to serve God as a messenger of the cross?

At this point James has carried on the discussion of “slow to speak: (1:19). He has just been writing about idle faith in 2:14-26, and now he proceeds to expound the peril of the idle word, wrong speech after wrong

action. Indeed, in 1:26 he has already mentioned the failure to bridle the tongue as a sure sign of vain religion. Now he expands the matter in a remarkable paragraph.

One area in which the tongue is apt to go awry is with teachers. We must not think simply of teachers like Paul's apostles, prophets, teachers (1 Cor. 12:28 f.; Eph. 4:11). In the *Didache* (xiii.2, xv 1, 2⁴) teachers are placed on par with prophets and higher than bishops and deacons. There is no doubt that teaching received tremendous emphasis in the work of the early Christians. Jesus is the great Teacher of the ages and is usually presented as teaching. In the Jewish "houses of learning" (synagogues) teaching was as prominent an element as worship. The official teachers passed away, and the modern Sunday school movement is an effort to restore the teaching function in the churches.

Teachers are necessary in the church, yet they must be ready and willing to speak that which needs to be heard rather than pandering to the hearers. Paul spoke of those who would do the latter: ³"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; ⁴And they shall

⁴ *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It is one of the most important discoveries of the second half of the nineteenth century. There are several references in early Christian literature to a book with this or a similar title, and by applying the methods of comparative criticism to documents which had probably made use of it, especially the "Apostolic Constitutions" and the "Church Ordinances," a rough reconstruction of some of its features had been obtained; but it was not known to be extant until Bryennios in 1875 discovered it in the Patriarchal library of Jerusalem at Constantinople.

The passage quoted reads:

15. Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. (2) You must not, therefore, despise them, for they are your honored men, along with the prophets and teachers.

turn away *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). The *Shepherd of Hermas* spoke of the same danger: “Because of this arrogance of theirs, understanding has left them and a foolish stupidity has taken possession of them. Yet they praise themselves for having wisdom and want to be volunteer teachers, foolish though they are.”⁵

James is speaking of the “unofficial” teachers in the churches. Some were apparently of arrogant convictions and little knowledge, but felt that they had no need to learn anything from their brethren. They considered themselves to be fully equipped as teachers. Paul apparently came across some with the same disease of whom he said that they “desir[ed] to be teachers of the law, though they underst[oo]d neither what they said], nor whereof they confidently affirm[ed] (1 Tim. 1:7).

Some with fluency of speech really had no message and only spoke out of vanity and really thought more of the admiration that they might excite by a display of their powers than of the light and strength that through God’s grace they might give their brethren. Evidently James is here concerned with these promiscuous, officious, irresponsible, self-appointed teachers with a cocksure explanation of all difficulties and not afraid to rush in where angels fear to tread.

The world is full of roving teachers with every sort of ism to dispense to the public. Both Jews and Athenians were eager for something newer than the last stale theory (the very latest fad). The synagogues of the Jews and the churches of the Christians offered a fine platform for these cranks to air their notions. Besides, some of the best of men, earnest Christians, have a “lust for talk” that leads them into all sorts of excesses.

⁵ Holmes, M. W. (1999). *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations* (Updated ed.) (507). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

James, therefore, is pleading for restraint and moderation when he says, “Be not many of you teachers,” or as Moffat translates it, “Do not swell the ranks of the teachers.” Teachers are absolutely necessary, but the thing can be overdone. Some learners (disciples) are needed. Liberty within reasonable limits must be allowed, but not rank license. Men must not be too eager to teach what they do not know.

There is no danger of an oversupply of well-equipped teachers, who are masters of the message of Christ. There are still too many who are unqualified and unwilling to become so. Therefore, the accent on teacher training is essential. The caution of James is pertinent today, but we must not discourage timid souls who can learn to teach and who ought to undertake it. The greatness of the teacher’s task must not be overlooked. James warns us against its abuse. There is a mental sloth that is as bad as this eagerness to be teachers, a lazy satisfaction with the elements of Christianity and failure to grow into the position of teachers of the doctrines of grace, continuing as babes unable to digest solid food (Heb. 5:12).

Teaching has to be done. There is no escape from that, but those who teach must understand their responsibility. They are doctors of the mind and heart. They cannot escape their responsibility as spiritual surgeons, for they deal with the issues of life and death, ”knowing that we shall receive a heavier judgment.” In seasons of religious excitement it is particularly desirable that teachers shall bear this fact in mind. There is danger for the teacher and for those that hear and are led astray by foolish talk.

Feeling was probably running high in some of the churches, and there was occasion for the sobering words of James. The penalty of untruth is untruth, to imbibe which is death. One has only to recall the words of Jesus: “And I say unto you, that for every idle word that men shall speak, they shall

give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned (Matt. 12:36 f.). It is easy to be overconfident, like the complacency of the Jews of whom Paul said that each was confident that he was “a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of babes” (Rom. 2:20). It is bad enough to break one of the least commandments, but whoever does “and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

There is no escaping the fact that a heavier penalty rests on preachers and teachers who leave a trail of error behind them. This can be done in two ways. The “trail of error” left behind can be either the direct teaching of error (knowingly or unknowingly) or a failure to teach against error (because of ignorance of its existence or knowing of its existence and intentionally avoiding it). In the days of the New Testament Christians dealt with Pharisaism, Gnosticism, Mithraism⁶, the emperor cult, and a hundred and

⁶ The god Mithra has a complex past extending back to ancient India, where he was a god of truth and light. He also became very popular in Persia, where again he was associated with truth and with contracts between persons. During the Hellenistic period, there is evidence of a cult of Mithra at Commagene in the south of Turkey. Here, Mithra is identified with the sun, and astrology is used in the construction of what the cult perceived to be its cosmic dimensions.

How the mystery cult of Mithra arose in Rome in the late 1st century A.D. is unclear. Some would argue that the cult gradually developed from the Persian worship of Mithra, while others attribute the cult’s invention to an individual or a group of people acquainted with Persian religion. Indeed, there are similarities between the Persian worship of Mithra and the mystery cult, but there are also a great many differences. The iconography of the mystery cult, e.g., is pervaded by Greco-Roman astrological and astronomical images.

As the cult was closed and private, there is very little literary evidence describing how it functioned. There are, however, numerous Mithra monuments including the caves in which the members of the cult would worship their god. These caves (Mithraea) can be found in Rome and throughout the empire as the cult was very popular among soldiers, slaves, and freedmen. Only men could join the cult, and the iconography indicates that once initiated into the mysteries, a man could gradually ascend a symbolic ladder of grades. These initiation and ascension ceremonies were also connected with concerns about the afterlife.

With the triumph of Christianity, the worship of Mithra disappeared. Some Mithraea

one other vagaries of the age. Certainly a teacher must speak his mind. He must be intellectually honest and tell what he sees, but he is not called upon to give his guesses at truth as truth. He ought to be interesting if he can, but not at the expense of truth. Freedom of teaching is quite consonant with fidelity to truth. One does not have to be a mere traditionalist in order to escape wild speculation. He must bring forth things new and old if they are true.

The severest words that fell from the lips of Jesus are against the Pharisees who filled the place of teachers for the Jews but who “say and do not,” who “sit on Moses’ seat” as authoritative teachers and yet “strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel” (Matt. 23:2-3, 24). “Woe to you lawyers! For ye took away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered” (Luke 11:52). The child was kept in the dark while at school because the teacher did not let in the light.

have been discovered, however, often underneath the churches that were built over them.