

The World's Most Dangerous Profession

Taming the Tongue Part 1
James 3:1-2 5-17-2015

Summary: James wants to discourage proud, honor-seekers from becoming teachers. Teaching brings a constant temptation toward pride, so those who are already proud are not ready. To discourage them, James warns that 1) the chastisement for their sins will be greater as teachers, and 2) the opportunity for sin will be far more because of the increased use of the mouth. But those who are gifted should teach. And if you are living for man's approval, let Jesus take that burden from you.

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James 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2** We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. **3** When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **4** Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6** The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. **7** All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, **8** but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. **10** Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. **11** Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? **12** My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. **13** Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14** But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15** Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. **16** For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. **17** But the

wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Introduction: We Talk a Lot

How many books do you read in a year? Can you imagine reading over 130 books/year? That's a book every two to three days. If you did that, you would be taking in quite a bit of information, wouldn't you? I give you that number because even though very few people read that many words, that is about how many words all of us are speaking. If all of the words that an average person speaks in a year were put into print, it would fill 132 books. It is incredible to stop and think of how much we talk. God is a self-revealing, communicating being. And He made us in His image, and so every one of us has a powerful drive to communicate.

We are not like the animals. Animals can't speak. They can communicate a few very basic things about being hungry or in danger or whatever, but most people, if they were only able to communicate as much as an animal communicates, would go insane. God created us in such a way that each one of us is a fountain of words. It's true, some fountains are gushing quite a bit more than other fountains, but even really quiet people speak millions of words. We have been studying through the book of James, and in chapter 3 James addresses the world of our words. And we find right away that our world of words is a world of trouble.

Warning: Not Many Should Teach

Why Warn about Teaching?

He starts the chapter with what seems at first to be a very strange command.

James 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers

The word **presume** isn't in the Greek – literally it is just **not many of you should be teachers**. The reason I say that sounds strange is because everywhere else in the New Testament teaching is held in such high esteem. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says that if a man desires to be a pastor, that is a noble desire. If you want to be a preacher, that's good. The task that you are desiring is a noble task. Teachers and preachers are described in Ephesians 4 as God's gift to the church. Teaching is an absolutely essential component of church life. Jesus spent his entire ministry going around teaching and preaching, and then He commissioned His Apostles to go out and preach. And He commissioned all of us to teach in the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

One of our most fundamental duties as Christians is teaching – every one of us.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom

All of us are to do some teaching on an informal basis, and those who are called into leadership in the church have a special responsibility to teach. According to 1 Timothy 3:2, no one is allowed to be an elder in the church unless he is able to teach.

God Wants the Teachers to Be the Overseers

A lot of churches stumble over that, because there are some really skilled leaders and administrators out there who don't have the gift of teaching. And it seems like it makes such good sense to let those

people lead the church and fulfill the governing, overseeing aspect of church leadership. So often, men who are gifted teachers are kind of mediocre in the areas of administration and organization and decision-making and oversight. And so a lot of churches say, “Why not just let the teachers teach and let other men take care of oversight of the church?” But that is not God’s design. God wants the teachers to be the overseers because knowledge of God’s word is more important than administrative skill when it comes to decision-making and oversight of the church. That is not to say that management ability is unimportant. God requires that for elders as well. They need to prove their management ability by managing their homes well, so God does require some management ability for a pastor. But by far, the greatest emphasis in Scripture falls on the teaching. In Acts 6, when the Apostles’ administrative responsibilities started to interfere with the Ministry of the Word and prayer, guess which one got delegated – administration and organization. Teaching is the priority. The exhortations for church leaders to be faithful in teaching and preaching in the ministry of the Word are as solemn as they come. When Paul wants to exhort Timothy to be faithful in preaching, listen to how serious his charge is:

2 Timothy 4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

So with that strong current flowing through the New Testament pointing to the value and importance of the teaching role, it’s a little bit of a surprise when James comes out and discourages his readers from becoming teachers. What’s happening here? Is James going against the grain of the rest of the New Testament?

Why is James a Teacher?

And another question - how did James put this principle into practice back when he was making the decision of whether or not to be a teacher? We know that James did end up deciding to become a teacher. He includes himself in the group of teachers.

3 ... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

So in spite of his own warning, James made the decision to go ahead and become a teacher. Evidently, James wants some people to read this and say, “I see what you are saying James, but I’m going to go ahead and be a teacher anyway.” And James wants other people to read this and say, “Wow, now that I understand that, I’m not going to be a teacher.” James’ purpose in writing this passage is to weed out that second group of people from the pool of potential teachers. He does not want to discourage that first group from teaching, but he does want to discourage that second group from teaching. So let’s take a look at the context and see if we can figure out who that second group is. Who are these people who want to be teachers, but shouldn’t be?

Who Should Avoid Teaching

I think we can answer that question in two ways.

Those with Bad Doctrine

If we look backwards to the preceding context, we see that James just got done rebuking some people that he called fools (2:20). They were fools because they made too much of a separation between faith and works and ended up teaching easy believism. Obviously, if a person doesn’t have a strong understanding of sound doctrine, that person is not ready to be a teacher.

1 Timothy 1:7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

People like that have a strong desire to teach, but they obviously aren't ready.

Those with Pride

So that is one kind of person James would want to discourage from becoming a teacher. But I don't think that's his primary focus here. There is another group that he wants to weed out of the pool. They are people who might have great doctrine and they might be really smart and excellent communicators, but they have one particular problem that should keep them out of the teaching ministry. And James spends the whole rest of the body of this book addressing that problem. It is the problem of pride.

In chapter 5 he rebukes the rich people who thought they were better than the poor people. At the end of chapter 4 he rebukes the people who were boasting and bragging about all their future plans, and who were relying on themselves instead of God. Right before that he rebukes the people who were judging others and looking down on them. Before that is a whole section calling them to repentance for their pride because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So that is what's coming in the rest of the book. But the nearest context is right here in chapter 3. And what we see in chapter 3, after James gets done describing the power and danger of the tongue, he gives us the contrast between the good kind of wisdom and the bad kind. And the primary marks of the bad kind are **envy and selfish ambition**. You see that in verses 14 and 16. The term translated **selfish ambition** refers to people who want a title or position of honor. They are so wise in their own eyes, that they want status. And the **envy** part means they tend to be hostile towards the people who have those positions that they want. They think, "I'm the one who should be in that position, not him." Jesus warned us about people like that.

Matthew 23:7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

They love having titles of honor and respect. These people are usually pretty easy to spot when they come to Agape, because they'll come to us and say, "I want to teach." And so we say, "Okay, how about you start with teaching the youth group?" And they aren't interested. There is no title that goes along with that. It won't get them any special reputation with people in the church. Most people won't even know they're doing it.

These are the kind of people who say, "I want to be an elder or deacon," and we say, "What ministry are you doing?" and they say, "Well, nothing just yet, but here's what I plan to do once I'm ordained..." That's someone who cares more about the title than the work.

Leadership is a Place of Constant Temptation toward Pride

Those are the last people you ever want to place in leadership. Leadership in the church, and especially teaching ministry, is a place where there is constant temptation to become a man pleaser. When you teach a class and it starts out with 40 people, and a month later it's down to six - that's pretty humiliating. But on the other hand, if you start with six and after a few weeks you have to change rooms because more and more people keep crowding in, even the most humble man will be tempted to be puffed up with pride. And so there is a constant temptation to cater to people's desires so that they will like you as a teacher. And that is especially true if you make your living by teaching. For someone like me, if I preach and the people don't come back, I'm out of a job. My livelihood depends on people wanting to hear more of my teaching. And so there is a constant temptation to begin formulating what I say in my sermons in such a way as to gain approval from people. It is a constant temptation, but it is a deadly sin.

Galatians 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

That's a pretty strong statement. But it's true. Seeking approval from men destroys your faith in Christ.

John 5:44 How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

Seeking honor from men is incompatible with faith. Every human being seeks honor. The question is, do you seek it from men or from God?

Romans 2:7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

If you seek honor and glory from God, God will give you honor and glory and eternal life. But if you seek it from men, you are not a servant of Christ. And that is hard, because if you are a faithful Bible teacher, as you go verse by verse through the Scriptures, fairly often you will hit something and realize, “If I teach this, it is not going to go over well. If I say this, we’re going to lose some families. People are going to be upset with me. The giving is going to drop.” That happens all the time, and it is in those moments when you find out whether you are working for the approval of men or of God.

On top of all that, there is the fact that when you are a Bible teacher, you have a lot of influence on people’s lives. Sometimes people come to me and tell me about some huge, major life decision they made based on some comment I made in a sermon. A Christian is someone who devotes his entire existence to doing whatever the Bible says. And their main way of learning what the Bible says is through Bible teachers. And so Bible teachers have tremendous influence in people’s lives.

On top of that, for some people, it is easy to fall in love with the attention you get as a teacher. If you tell a joke and a whole roomful of people laugh - that can get pretty addicting. If you say something and people grab a pen and say, “Wow, I need to write that down” - that can really stroke your ego. To have people think of you as being wise or come to you for advice – so many different aspects of being a teacher can so easily puff up the ego.

That’s why God had to give Paul a painful, limiting thorn in his flesh. It was to keep him humble. Without that thorn, even Paul would have been caught up with pride. When God gives you gifts of teaching that put you in the public spotlight, very often those gifts come with a major thorn - some terrible weakness that stands as a constant humbling influence.

And so if that’s how the teaching ministry is – a constant temptation towards pride even for the most humble men, then the last thing you want is someone getting into the ministry who is already proud. Or who is susceptible to pride. That’s why you have to be careful with new converts or young men.

1 Timothy 3:6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.

Notice, the concern is not that they won’t do a good job as an elder. They might do a great job. The concern is the danger of becoming proud. You make someone like that an elder and he looks around at the older men and says, “I’ve only been a Christian five years and I’ve already made it to this level,” and here comes the pride.

Overvaluing Leadership

This was a problem back in James’ day, and it is a problem today. There is always a tendency to overvalue leadership roles. People with extroverted, public type gifts are admired, and people with quiet, behind-the-scenes gifts are undervalued. If we give an award or special honor to someone, it’s typically not going to be the person with a gentle quiet spirit, even though that is of great worth in the eyes of the Lord. We follow the world’s lead and give special honor to the people who are upfront and visible.

You can see this even in the way people talk about their children. They see their kids developing leadership skills and they get all excited.

“Look at him – he’s such a leader.”

So what? The leaders in the church are just another part of the body. That is like looking at your elbow and saying, “Look at that – that is such an elbow.”

Luke 22:24 A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. 25 Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

In the world, leadership is lordship. In the church, leadership is servanthood. And so people who have ambition for a title or position or glory from men need to be weeded out from the pool of folks who want to be teachers.

Warning of Judgment

So, how does James accomplish that – without deterring the people who are truly called? He does it with a warning about the downside of being a teacher.

James 3:1 Not many of you should be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Greater Punishment

What does that mean? Sometimes people take that to mean that there is a higher standard for teachers or church leaders than there is for everyone else. It is not what James is saying here, nor is even true. How could there be a higher standard for teachers than for regular Christians? The standard for regular Christians is in Matthew 5:48 **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** What standard could be higher than that? The standard for regular Christians is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. How could there be a standard higher than that? If someone wants to argue that there is a higher standard for teachers than for everyone else, my question is this: Tell me one sin that the Bible says is okay for you to commit as long as you’re not a teacher. There isn’t one. God’s law is the same for everyone. Think of the qualifications for pastor.

1 Timothy 3:2 Now the overseer must be above reproach ...

Does that mean it’s okay for everyone else to be beneath reproach?

2 ...a one woman man...

Does that mean everyone else can sleep around?

2 ... temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable ... 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money...

Every one of those are things that are required of all Christians. The reason those are given as the qualifications for elders is simply because the leaders of the church are to set the example for the way every single person in the church is supposed to live.

So no, it is not talking about a higher standard for teachers. So what is it talking about? Well, notice what he says. He does not say, “we who teach will be judged by a different standard.” What he says is, **we who teach will be judged more strictly.** You see, it is not that there is a higher standard, but rather there is a higher accountability to the same standard. The consequences for violating the standard are more severe for the teacher. If you are a lover of money, that is sin and there will be consequences in your life. But if I am a lover of money, the sin is the same, but the consequences, for me, are more severe. Chastisement from God¹ will be more severe.

¹ While it is true that teachers tend to be held to a higher standard by the people, that is not what James has in mind here. In 4:12 James makes the point that there is only one Judge – God Himself. People will also judge teachers more strictly, but their judgment is not what matters.

Luke 12:47 That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. 48 but the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

God holds you accountable for what you know, and as a teacher you have more access to knowledge than everyone else. Think of Moses. In a moment of temptation he strikes the rock instead of speaking to it, and the penalty is he doesn't get to ever enter the Promised Land. Why is God so hard on Moses? Moses was the greatest leader, Moses had the greatest access to God, and so Moses gets the most severe consequences for sin. If you fall into some sin and I fall into that same sin, and God brings His rod into your life and into my life, it is going to be more severe for me than for you, just because I'm a teacher.

And part of the reason for that is that the sins of teachers influence others to sin.

Matthew 5:19 Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

More Words = More Sin

So the consequences are more severe for the teacher, and then, in addition to that, the sheer volume of sins will naturally be greater for the teacher, just because he is using his mouth more.

2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

Nobody on the planet is capable of opening his mouth and talking for very long without sinning.

Proverbs 10:19 When words are many, sin is not absent

It is so easy to sin with your mouth. All sin originates in the heart. And there are a lot of sins of the heart that may never make it to your hands and feet. You might hate someone in your heart, but you don't actually end up physically attacking the person. You might covet something in your heart, but you don't go so far as to actually steal it. Lots of sins can be in your heart and not make it into your actions. But not very many sins can be in your heart and not find their way out of your mouth in some form.

Many Ways

And notice what James says there in verse 2.

2 We all stumble in many ways.

The different ways you can sin with your tongue are almost endless. How about the hasty, thoughtless word?

The proud word.

The selfish word.

The self-serving exaggeration.

The sly suggestion.

The manipulative flattery.

Words of anger.

Words of slander.

Harmful gossip.

Innuendo.

Words of doubt.

Impure words.

Rebellious words.

Self-aggrandizing words.

Words of condemnation.

Threats.

Words that inflict guilt.

Words that induce shame.

Unkind or unhelpful words.

Words of criticism.

Boasting.

Complaining.

Grumbling.

Divisive words.
Self-serving, selective stories.
Lying.
Half-truths.
False doctrine.

Insensitive words.
Sarcastic words.
Insults.
Belittling words.
Discouraging words.

There's just no end to the different ways you can sin with your mouth. That is why in Romans 3 when Paul wants to summarize the severity of mankind's sin problem, the focus is on the mouth.

Romans 3:13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips."14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

Talking is dangerous. And not a little bit dangerous. Listen to the extremes that James goes to to warn us about the danger of talking:

5 ... Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

... 8 no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

The tongue is powerful, it is uncontrollable, it is incendiary, and it is double minded. And so every time you open your mouth, you are risking all of that. And guess whose mouth is open around here more than anyone else's? I stand up here every Sunday and say 7000 words while you all sit there and say nothing. The main tool the teacher uses for his job is a dangerous, deadly, destructive, devastating thing. Talking is like walking through a minefield – it is just a matter of time before you step on a bomb. And teachers have to spend a lot more time walking around in the minefield than everyone else.

So James says, "Think twice before becoming a teacher." He is not saying, "Don't be a teacher." He is saying, "Do not become a teacher unless you are prepared to take the task very, very seriously." You will have to spend a lot more time in the minefield, and when you step on one, the blast is going to be bigger for you than it is for everyone else. More opportunity to sin, and greater consequences when you do sin. If I asked you to give me a list of all of the most dangerous professions, you might say fireman, coal miners, racecar drivers, rescue swimmers - but I don't know if anybody would say Bible teachers. But James would. If you are a racecar driver or a coalminer, you might have an accident and die and go to heaven. But as a teacher, you can put yourself into a position of being punished by God in much more severe ways than anyone else. And when you make mistakes as a teacher, those mistakes can ruin people's lives. Bible teachers are a danger to themselves and to others. And so if James were a country-western singer he would be singing, "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow up to Be Rabbis. Don't let 'em write sermons or stand up and talk, or come Judgment Day they'll be in for a shock."

Who Should Teach?

So if all that is true, who in his right mind would want to teach? And why is James a teacher? I remember as a kid listening to Waylon Jennings sing "Don't Let Your Babies Grow up to Be Cowboys". The next line is, *Don't let 'em pick guitars or drive them old trucks.* And I remember thinking, *he's picking a guitar while he's telling my mom not to let me grow up and pick a guitar.* And James is the same way. He is a teacher, and he is sitting there teaching us about not being teachers. Did he not listen to his own advice? Why is he a teacher? Clearly some people are supposed to be teachers, so how do you know if you are one of them?

The Gifted

The most basic answer to that question is in

Romans 12:6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

How do you know if you are supposed to be a teacher? If God gave you that gift, then be a teacher. But just make sure you take the responsibility very, very seriously lest you fall under God's judgment. The fact is, the church is in desperate need of good, skilled, gifted, expository teachers and preachers. God does not give you a spiritual gift so that you can sit on it. Remember the parable of the talents in Matthew 25? Three servants were entrusted with different amounts of money. Two of them, put that money to work and got a return, and to both of those servants the master said, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" But the third servant just buried his money in the ground, and when the master returned, he said, "Here's your money," but there was no return on it. In the master said, "You wicked, lazy servant." If God gave you the gift of teaching, you will face a stricter judgment when you sin, but if you decide to just bury that gift and not use it to serve the church, you will get an even worse judgment. 1 Corinthians 12-14 makes it very clear that no one receives a spiritual gift for himself. Whatever gift you have received, it's for the church. And if you don't use it to serve the church, you are defrauding both the church and the Lord.

Now, does God sometimes call you to do things in the church that you are not gifted at? Absolutely. But the primary way that God wants to use you in His church is in the area of the spiritual gift that He gave you. Edmund Clowney has a great statement on that: "What has God put in your power to do in his service? What you can do, you must do." If you are gifted, then you are called.

People need to be reminded of that even after they get into ministry. Leadership in the church is hard, and there is a constant temptation to quit. And so Paul had to tell Timothy, "**Do not neglect your gift**" (1 Tim.4:14). Then again in 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy 1:6 I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God

Don't neglect it, Timothy - stir it up.

How to Know if You Have the Gift

"So how do I know if I have the spiritual gift of teaching?"

I would say the simplest way is this – when you explain passages of Scripture to people, do they usually understand it better after you are done talking than before you started talking? If they are more confused at the end than they were at the beginning, you might not have the gift. But if you find that you just have a knack for making people understand biblical principles, and you can explain it differently to different kinds of people so that whoever you are talking to can get it, you probably have the gift of teaching. Use the people of God to verify your giftedness. God's people want to hear gifted teachers teach the Bible. There are plenty of Bible teachers running around saying, "I've got the gift, I've got the gift." And there is a whole group of people trailing behind him saying, "No he doesn't, no he doesn't." But when someone does have the gift, God's people will be eager to listen. Anytime you want to know what your gift is, pay close attention to which things you do that really seem to especially bless God's people.

Then, once it is established that you have the gift, you need to fan it into flame. It takes study and training and practice to develop that gift. And most of all, to prevent your teaching ministry from being worthless, that gift needs to be governed by love. Spiritual gifts without love are like a resounding gong or clanging cymbal. The real teacher sees God's people and his or her heart just aches for them to

understand God's Word. It is not a longing to be up front. It is not a longing to be looked up to and respected. It's not a longing to be thought of as clever or funny. It is a longing for people to get what they need from God's Word. It is a driving passion that sees a principal in Scripture and just can't stand it until that principle gets into their hearts.

If you have a craving to be the center of attention, you are not ready. If you have a desire to make a name for yourself, or you've got your eye on that title or that position, James is telling you, "Stay away from the teaching ministry. The increased severity of God's judgment on your life will not be worth whatever thrill you get from having that position." If there is a lack of humility in your life, stay away. If you love telling people what to do but have a hard time being told what to do, stay away. If you are the type who can only learn from certain people – there are not very many people in the church who can teach you anything, stay away from the teaching ministry. One of the most damaging blights on the church of Jesus Christ is the teacher who is unteachable.

One more – if you are picky about who you teach, stay away. I found that people with the gift of teaching are thrilled for the opportunity to teach anyone who will listen. It doesn't matter if it's 10 teenagers in a youth group, or 1000 pastors at a conference - they love any opportunity to teach God's Word.

Conclusion: Seeking Human Applause

You might be sitting there thinking, "this passage doesn't apply to me. I'm not interested in teaching – so what does this passage have to say to me?" Quite a bit, actually. James mentions the wannabe teachers in the first two verses, but after that, the topic of teaching disappears from the discussion, and everything else applies universally to everyone. So if you have a tongue this morning, this passage is for you.

Remember, there isn't a higher standard for leaders – only a higher accountability to the same standard, which means all these principles apply to everyone. When I was describing that selfish ambition for a position, you might have heard that and thought, "That's not me. I don't have any desire to be a teacher, or to be up front or in the spotlight." But even those of you who prefer to stay in the background – isn't there still something in you that craves the approval of men even above the approval of God? In his book *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer has a whole chapter on the heavy, heavy burden of seeking human approval.

When Jesus said, **Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest** (Mt 11:28), one of the burdens He gives us rest from is the exhausting labor of self-glorification. Tozer: "The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from a bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest. Continue this fight through the years and the burden will become intolerable. Yet the sons of earth are carrying this burden continually, challenging every word spoken against them, cringing under every criticism, smarting under each fancied slight, tossing sleepless if another is preferred before them."

Think of the things that you say about yourself when you are confessing your sins to God. Then think of how worked up you get when other people say those very same things about you or treat you as if you really were the worm that you just told God that you were earlier in the day. The work of convincing yourself and everybody else that you are better than you are is exhausting work. The ordeal of keeping up our impressive façade to win and maintain the approval of men is a full-time job that taxes us to the breaking point. And Jesus comes to you in Matthew 11 and offers you rest. If you are a believer, He lived a perfect life in your place. On my worst days as a pastor, my comfort isn't that I'm better than some other pastors. My comfort is that Jesus Christ is a perfect pastor in my place. If you have really blown it as a mom, Jesus Christ is a perfect parent to your children in your place in God's sight. If your efforts at work are just inadequate, Jesus is the perfect employee in your place. Forget about the approval of people – including the approval of that person in the mirror. The only approval that matters is God's. We don't have to keep up this mad scramble to protect the reputation of the idol of self. You no longer have to carry that crushing burden. Lay it down, right now. Let Jesus carry it for you. If He lets your reputation get

dragged in the dirt for a time in the eyes of men, that's okay. The only thing that matters is that you are pleasing in the sight of God the Father because you are in Christ. And when the time is right, he will bestow honor on you in the eyes of men. And in the meantime He says, "Come to me you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

Benediction - 1 Thessalonians 3:12,13 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. Which people in your life are you most susceptible to caring more about their approval than God's?
2. Name at least one spiritual gift or strength that you see in someone else in the group.
3. Are you using your gifts to serve the church? If not, what is standing in the way?