

Be Careful What You Teach!

By: David Burruss

**“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”
(James 3:1)**

James gives a serious warning about teaching. He does not say that many should refrain from becoming teachers because they are poor speakers, unpopular, highly educated, less educated, physically limited, or dealing with some other difficulty. His concern is much deeper. Those who teach will “receive a stricter judgment.”

At first, that may sound harsh, but the rest of James 3 helps explain why the warning is so serious. James immediately turns his attention to the tongue and the power of our words. He writes, “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body” (James 3:2). He then compares the tongue to a bit that directs a horse, a rudder that directs a ship, and a small fire capable of setting a great forest ablaze. His point is clear: something small can have tremendous influence.

That becomes especially important when someone takes on the responsibility of teaching others about God. A teacher does more than share a personal opinion. People may listen, learn, repeat what they hear, and even shape their understanding of Scripture around what has been taught. If the teaching is true, it can help someone better understand and obey God’s Word. If it is false, careless, shallow, or unsupported by Scripture, it can lead someone in the wrong direction. That helps us understand why James speaks of a stricter judgment. Greater influence brings greater responsibility.

Paul made this same point when he told Timothy, “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16). Timothy was not simply told to be sincere or well meaning. He was told to pay careful attention both to his own life and to what he taught. Later, Paul instructed him, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). A teacher must handle Scripture carefully because truth matters.

That is worth remembering when religious discussions take place on social media or in other public settings. Some discussions can be useful and can encourage deeper study. Others can spread ideas that are poorly supported or plainly contrary to Scripture. Popularity does not determine truth. Neither does sincerity, friendship, education, personality, confidence, or personal hardship. Every teaching still has to be measured by the Word of God.

The Bereans give us a good example of how teaching should be received. When Paul preached to them, they “received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). They were willing to listen, but they were also willing to examine. They did not accept something merely because a respected teacher said it. They compared what they heard with Scripture, and we should do the same.

This also means that we must learn to distinguish compassion for a person from agreement with what that person teaches. Someone may be dealing with emotional, mental, physical, or personal struggles. Those circumstances should affect the way we approach them. They should move us toward patience, kindness, and understanding rather than ridicule or cruelty. However, those circumstances do not determine whether what has been taught is true.

A person’s condition may help us understand why something was said, but it cannot change the standard of truth. Scripture remains the standard. We should be compassionate toward people without using compassion as a reason to excuse false teaching. At the same time, we should never use truth as an excuse to be harsh.

That is also why biblical correction should not automatically be treated as a personal attack. Correction can certainly be handled badly. It can be arrogant, insulting, or motivated by pride, and Scripture gives no approval to that kind of behavior. Paul wrote that “a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in

humility correcting those who are in opposition" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Correction should never become an opportunity to embarrass someone, make a name for ourselves, win an argument, or create further division. The goal should be to help someone see the truth of Scripture.

Ephesians 4:15 speaks of "speaking the truth in love." Those two things belong together. Truth without love can become cruel, while love without truth can become compromise. Faithfulness requires both.

The teacher therefore has a responsibility to examine himself carefully. Have I studied the passage in its context? Am I teaching what the text actually says, or simply repeating something I have heard? Am I willing to be corrected if someone shows me from Scripture that I am wrong? A person who teaches should care more about being faithful to God's Word than about defending his own reputation or position.

The hearer has responsibilities as well. We should listen carefully, examine what is taught, and refuse to let friendship or loyalty decide what we believe. It can be easy to excuse error when the person speaking is someone we respect or love, but our allegiance must first be to God and His Word.

James 3:1 should make teachers humble and careful. It should make us think seriously about the influence of our words and the responsibility that comes with teaching others. It should also remind listeners to search the Scriptures rather than simply accepting what anyone says.

Teaching matters because truth matters. Our words can help someone understand God more clearly, or they can lead someone away from what He has revealed. That is why James gives such a serious warning, and why both teachers and hearers should approach these matters with humility, care, love, and a sincere desire to follow the Word of God.