

18. The Sin of the Tongue: Part I

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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.

(James 3:1-2)

Who Are the Teachers?

Up to this point in his letter, James has already referred to the sin of the tongue several times: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (1:19); “Keep a tight rein on [the] tongue” (1:26); “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged” (2:12). In chapter 3, he elaborates on this terrible sin of not keeping one’s tongue under control. He calls the tongue a fire that sets everything else on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (3:6). This is strong language, to say the least.

It is remarkable how James begins with *teachers* when addressing the sin of the tongue. His focus on teachers, however, does not exclude other members of the congregation. Those who are not teachers may not simply disregard this part of James’ letter as if it does not apply to them. As a matter of fact, James is warning the entire congregation that not many of them should *presume* to be teachers.

It is true that with the word “teachers”, James first of all means office bearers. We know from Scripture that there were first apostles, then prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph 4:11). The distinction has been made that apostles, prophets, and evangelists were transient, moving from one place to another, while pastors and teachers retained a local position and responsibility. They had to equip the churches that had been planted by the apostles and their helpers. The title of teacher, therefore, can indeed be taken to mean a local office, perhaps the office of the minister and the elders together.

But we should note that the special offices originate from and rest upon the office of all believers. One cannot be called to a special office if he does not show forth the qualities that God asks of all his children. This text about

teachers is thus not restricted to them alone, but it contains a message for all the people of God. Strictly speaking, James does not even address the office bearers but all the brothers, especially those who are seeking a prominent place in the church. What holds true for all the church is true especially in the case of those who would take a leading position. James begins his warning against the sin of the tongue by addressing those who would be teachers in the church. There must be integrity in desiring the office, humility in exercising the office, and maturity in fulfilling the office.

Desiring the Office

James writes, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers.” From this, I conclude that there were people, perhaps many, who wanted to be recognized as teachers in the church. Some of these people unashamedly forced themselves on the churches and demanded recognition as teachers. This may have been due to the fact that many former rabbis, who had converted and joined the church and who were accustomed to teaching and leadership, desired a similar office in the church. These rabbis had taught in the synagogues and in the Jewish schools and needed a new occupation.

They may also have had other motives besides seeking a livelihood. The word “rabbi” literally means “the great one”, and denotes a position of authority and reverence. These men were accustomed to speaking and to being heard, and they desired the same status in the Christian church. There may have been battles about the leadership in local churches, and this must have come to James’ attention. Why would he write about a non-existing situation? Apparently, jostling and battling for leadership was a real problem in the churches.

James does not say that desiring the office of teacher is wrong in itself. Paul even wrote to Timothy that “[if] anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (I Tim 3:1). To strive for the office of minister, elder, or deacon is indeed a noble striving, but it must not be a presumptuous, self-seeking desire that lacks integrity. One has to be convinced of the weight and importance of the office, and of the accompanying responsibility and accountability.

An office is not a position that automatically grants glory and honor. An office does demand respect, as the Bible indicates, but the office bearers must also show themselves to be worthy. In this line, we understand that an office brings with it a heavy responsibility. James includes himself when he addresses the local situations: “because you know that we who teach will be

judged more strictly.” Whoever opens his mouth to speak and whoever wants to be heard and recognized in the church of Christ must realize that every word is weighed and judged by God.

We learn how serious this really is from the example of Moses. He was the most humble man on the face of the earth, always speaking kindly. At Meriba, however, he became angry and rash words came from his lips. The result was that he never entered the promised land (Num 20:1-13). We might say that this was a heavy judgment for such a light sin, but God says that Moses, of all people, as teacher, should have known better and spoken differently.

Integrity

What is the true concern of James, then? I think that we can safely say it is the *ambition* (shown by some members) to gain a leading position in the church. They will go to any lengths to gain such a place. There is the danger that some are false teachers, but the falseness of their teachings is not recognized or understood by themselves or others. There may also be weak teachers who do not live the doctrine and sow confusion in the church. There may be recent converts who think that they know it all, while in fact they are just beginning to understand. And then there are the peddlers and panders who use any means to gain a place of prominence.

We must remember that James is here referring to the sin of the tongue. What are people really saying? Is there integrity en route to the offices? Do those who serve really love the Lord and his Word, and are they careful in bringing only that Word and nothing more, nothing less? James is not merely writing about expressions and formulations, but about the *integrity* of those who speak and teach in the church. Integrity means having the true and proper motivation to abide by the Word, and only the Word, with no hidden, self-serving agenda.

The office may be desirable and noble, but people should not be attracted to it for the wrong reasons. James writes that not many should presume to be teachers, as if being a teacher is such a simple and easy task, and as if one can stand up and say whatever he thinks or feels, demanding that others listen and take heed.

The Rabbis

Think of what our Lord Jesus told his disciples and the multitudes about the teachers of his day, the rabbis. He said, “Everything they do is done for

men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi’. But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ”(Matt 23:5-10).

The Lord Jesus does not reject the office of these men in this passage. He even said first, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you” (Matt 23:2-3). Christ did not renounce the offices given by God, but he rejected the self-serving and false seeking of the offices’ glory without being faithful to the calling.

To be an office bearer is to hold an honorable position, but at the same time it means being more accountable. Those who teach will be judged more strictly, not by men, but by the Lord Jesus. This is an important matter. Paul writes in I Corinthians 4:2, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” Those who teach must always prove themselves to be faithful. Facing much opposition, he adds, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me” (I Cor 4:3-4). He also warns, “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes” (I Cor 4:5).

Here the apostle Paul shows forth the integrity in which he served. The stricter judgment has nothing to do with people, but only with the Lord Jesus, and he judges justly. He alone sees the full picture and has the true understanding. If we also serve in this way, and do the work with integrity of mind and soul, we need not fear the stricter judgment.

Stumbling In Many Ways

In 3:3, James adds, “We all stumble in many ways.” This pertains to all the members of the congregation, not only the office bearers. What does this mean? Is this some kind of an excuse, a general absolution, for we are all sinners? We must be careful with such an explanation, for sometimes the general confession, “We are all sinners,” means someone is trying to hide something. And what about the word “stumbling”? We all stumble. Does this imply that stumbling is not too serious, since everyone does it?

The word that is translated as “stumble” literally means “to transgress, to sin”. The verb is also in the present tense, meaning that we all stumble

continuously. Our sins are not isolated incidents, but recurring events, and they are serious.

James even adds that we all stumble “in many ways.” There is no end to the variety of sins we commit. Indeed, many sins are simply a repeat of previous sins, because our weaknesses constantly get the better of us. There is no area of life of which we can say, “I have never sinned here.” The picture James paints in 3:2 is that of a person walking along and constantly stumbling, even falling, and having to be helped up time and again.

Do we all view our life in this manner? Can we say, “I am a fumbler and a bumbler, always stumbling and falling in so many different ways and things, falling far short of the measure of perfection which the Lord God has set?” It is this knowledge of our own sin and weakness that leads to the humility which is required in the office of teacher.

Humility Required

We all stumble in many ways. James infers that we must watch what we say to others and about others, for we, too, are sinners. We may not approach others with self-directed piety that borders on smugness and arrogance. When we admonish others, whether as office bearers or common members of the church, it must be done kindly, gently, and in consideration of our own weakness.

In Galatians 6:1, the apostle Paul writes, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” He continues by writing, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:3). It is so easy to say something about another and to accuse others of gross sins, while our own manner of speaking and acting leaves much to be desired.

What is needed is the humility to exercise the office properly. Everyone should be humble, but especially the office bearers. Sometimes humility is mistaken for weakness, but it does not mean that we let others walk all over us. Humility means that we do not respond in the same way, but with gentle kindness and understanding. Even when discipline must be exercised, it must be done with humility, wisdom, and kindness.

We must be careful with what we say. We can be so quick with our words. One nasty word receives an angry retort. Verbal aggression can rapidly escalate, until no one makes sense anymore. No one is listening,

because everyone is too busy talking. When we all get on a high horse, communication is virtually impossible because humility no longer prevails.

Controlling the Tongue

“We all stumble in many ways,” writes James. In 3:2, however, he also comes back to the subject at hand: “If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”

The expression “he is a perfect man” brings us back to the theme of James’ letter. The word that is translated as “perfect” actually means mature. We must grow towards the maturity of faith, and this pertains especially to control over our tongue.

James knows that we will not achieve perfection in this life with respect to our speaking. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man. We all understand that no one achieves this in this life. We must grow in controlling our tongue, and the maturity of faith is required in this respect. Growth is granted by God, but we will never be able to grow to complete perfection on this side of the great divide.

James writes that if we were never at fault in what we said, we would be perfect people, able to keep our whole body in check. In the following verses, he explains how the tongue is such a small member yet dominates the whole body. Such big noise from such a small part! If we can control our tongue, we can control our whole body. If we learn self-control in our speech, we learn self-control in other things as well, because the tongue is the hardest to control.

Maturity is required in fulfilling the office of teacher. Someone who is mature in speech knows what to say and when to say it. The content and timing of his words are right. Unfortunately, we often do not come close to maturity of speech. If only we could control our tongue, how many other aspects of life would we not be able to control!

We talk a lot. Gossip is sometimes incessant, and much of our talk is very negative. We open our mouth and we criticize and condemn. James writes later, in 3:9, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men.” We can be subtle or brutal about it, but we easily and often condemn our fellow men. Nothing is good enough. No one is good enough. Sometimes, there is the implication that if we ourselves were in charge, things would be a lot different and certainly better. Some people’s

favorite pastime is to criticize our churches and ministers, and this is often the topic of conversation.

The Office Requires Maturity

Indeed, we may expect and demand maturity in speech, especially from office bearers, who are teachers. As such, public scrutiny comes with the territory. Those who teach will be evaluated and judged, sometimes condemned. Some teachers must deal with an inordinate amount of negativism, yet there is comfort in the Lord's words: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). There will be criticism, especially when we speak the truth. Our Lord certainly experienced that. When being called to teach, we should not think that pleasing people is the prime objective. Rather, the only goal is to bring God's Word, knowing that we will make mistakes and faults.

Those who speak must therefore learn to *listen*. It often goes together that we speak easily but listen poorly. When we are discussing something with another person, it is not unusual to have the feeling that the other is not even listening. He is already thinking of the next thing he wants to say, and what sounds like a dialogue is often a monologue.

Those in office have a position that requires maturity. Unless someone shows a sense of maturity, he cannot serve in office. Self-control is needed, especially in speaking, so that we do not needlessly antagonize members of the congregation. There must be sensitivity to the right formulation of words and the proper moment to say them, so that everyone can understand and accept what is being said.

James has only just begun his discourse on the sin of the tongue, but already he has been very clear. He has clearly stated that we must not presume to be someone we are not. We must watch what we say, for we must give account for every word. We must realize that those who teach are under stricter judgment. We must understand that no one is perfect in speaking, but that we must still choose our words with care and caution, not to please others, but to do justice to the truth.

Let us study the words of the greatest Teacher, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us learn from him what it means to be meek and humble. Let us take note that his words are always to the point, and that he speaks the truth with gentleness and discernment. And let us grow towards maturity, especially in

our speaking. Then we will be a blessing unto all, and God may call us to be teachers in the midst of his people.