

A Few Good Teachers • James 3:1-2

Students in a fourth grade class sent a get-well card to their teacher who was recovering from surgery. The card said, “Your fourth grade class wishes you a speedy recovery—by a vote of 15 to 14.”

Teaching can be tough. Expectations are high. Distractions are many. But the potential influence is incredible. Just think about some of the teachers who most influenced your life.

I remember the fear I had going into third grade because of Miss Jeroloman and all the stories I had heard about what she did to little kids. She was huge and she was mean. I was scared of her from September through June. The only time I remember experiencing anything close to kindness or gentleness was the day my grandmother died. She was not expected to die and I was the one who discovered her body. I was late for school that day and didn’t have a note. She demanded an explanation and considerably mellowed when I told her what had happened.

Miss Mauer was my teacher in the fourth grade. She was beautiful and young and kind and I think I fell in love with her. It was one of the best years of my entire childhood. But it ended with heartbreak when she announced at the end of the year that she was leaving teaching and becoming Mrs. Mayer. I never saw her again.

One of my grade school Sunday School teachers didn’t have much impact on me at the time but he told me a few years ago that he has prayed for me every day from the first Sunday I was in his class until now. I don’t recall anything he taught me but I think he helped to shape me for God with a lifetime of his prayers.

I think of a college speech teacher who never gave a compliment or affirmation to me or any other student. He had nothing but criticism for any of us and he convinced me that I should never become a teacher or a public speaker.

And then there were teachers who were not called teachers. We call them mentors and they have shaped my life with their leadership, their example, their experience and their wisdom. Some taught me great truths but never encouraged me; they gave no affirmation. I felt I could never measure up to their expectations. And there were others who believed in me and told me so and helped me to go beyond my dreams.

There are days when I wonder if I have ever had an original thought of my own, so much of who I am and what I do is the product of the teaching of others. I suspect the same is true for you.

Jesus’ brother wrote some serious words to would-be teachers in James 3:1-2:

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.

This sounds like a campaign to discourage would-be teachers. Reading James 3:1 could convince teachers to quit before they start. But, were these words really written to discourage teachers? Or were they written to say that teachers are very special people?

When these words were written in the first century teachers were held in highest regard. Most people couldn’t read so they depended on teachers for information and ideas. Teachers had followers or “disciples” who almost worshipped them — sort of like rock stars have “groupies” who follow them around, dress like their idols, believe anything they say or sing and do whatever they suggest.

Rabbis were an especially strong ancient Jewish example. Parents longed for their sons to become rabbis. “Rabbi” means “my great one”.

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They were treated with huge respect. One ancient tradition said that a rabbi was to be honored more than a parent because parents only bring children into this physical world but rabbis can bring a person into the spiritual world to come. If both your parents and your teacher were captured by an enemy and held for ransom you should always ransom your rabbi first. (I think that teaching came from rabbis, actually!)

You can begin to see why people in the first century wanted to be teachers. For the same reason 20th century Americans want to be movie stars, famous athletes and national politicians. It is very appealing to have people know our name, give you special treatment, spread on praise and listen to whatever you have to say. In the first century the high honor was to be a teacher.

James was worried that Christians might want to teach for the wrong reasons. He wanted to warn them about what they were getting into. One should never become a teacher to be famous or important or to get praise. These might be by-products of teaching but they should never be the primary motivation. Teachers should teach to please God and to shape the lives of their students.

Teachers are held to higher standards than everyone else. James says, “. . . *we who teach will be judged more strictly.*” I like the way he uses “we”. Teachers who say “you” do this and “you” do that as if they are better than anyone else make me uncomfortable. But James applied his teaching to himself and I think that is a mark of a very good teacher!

He principle is simple. If someone teaches something then that teacher should behave accordingly. What do you think of a dentist who doesn't floss? Or what about a mechanic who never changes the oil in his car? What about a chef who goes hungry or an accountant who doesn't file income tax returns? What about a pastor who doesn't believe in God or the Bible? Teachers are judged by a high standard because teachers should know more!

There is great responsibility that always comes with teaching. Teachers should practice what they preach. They should live out what they say to their students. Otherwise, their teaching is

contradicted by their lives and that undoes what they have taught.

This is especially the case when teaching God's truth. How terrible it would be to tell others how to have their sins forgiven but never be forgiven by God. It is sad to teach the truths of the Bible but not live out the truths of the Bible.

Personally, I take James 3:1 very seriously. When my alarm clock goes off each morning I wake up and slowly get going. But there is one day each week when the alarm sounds that I have a completely different feeling and I know that it is Sunday. My best description of the feeling is “fear”, although I'm not sure that's exactly what it is. It is the powerful emotion and realization of what it means to stand in front of thousands of people and teach the Bible. What if I don't get it right? What if I say the wrong thing? What will God think if I misrepresent him? What if I so ineffectively communicate the great truths of God that people don't hear or don't care or don't respond or they misunderstand? What if I don't live what I teach?

I often think of Martin Luther whose hands shook so much the first time he stood at the alter to celebrate communion that he could barely continue, so filled was he with the awe of representing God to other people.

I understand what James meant when he wrote, “*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*”

Does this mean we shouldn't teach? Quite the contrary! Teaching is great. If we have the truth of God it is a sin not to teach it to others.

Teaching is the best way to learn anything. Week after week of explaining the Bible in a home study group or a children's class or to an adult Sunday School class is the surest way to understand and master what the Bible is all about. To explain the Bible and to see God's truth revolutionize people's lives is the most satisfying experience anyone could have.

So, be a teacher. Be a teacher to one person at a time. Be a teacher to your family. Be a teacher at church. Be a teacher whenever and wherever God gives opportunity. But teach for the right reasons! Teach for God and truth and the benefit

of your students. Never teach to be important or get respect or to become proud.

James was a smart writer. He knew what most of us would say next. Most Christians would say, “I could never teach! I’m a sinner. I’ve done stupid things. I’d stumble and do a poor job. I could never be the kind of teacher God wants me to be!”

James immediately answers, “*We all stumble in many ways.*” If the standard for teaching were perfection there wouldn’t be one teacher. If everyone who sinned, stumbled, said something stupid, preached a bad sermon or taught a boring lesson were disqualified there wouldn’t be anybody doing it.

I have a note in my desk drawer that says, “Babe Ruth struck out over 1300 times.” That gives me great encouragement. It reminds me that striking out is not a disqualification for coming back to the plate. (Although, if you step up to teach and strike out every time it may mean that you should try doing something else!)

But James 3:2 is not talking about deliberate and habitual sins. This isn’t referring to the person who deliberately does something wrong, who won’t get help and who won’t change. It is saying that all of us make mistakes and that doesn’t disqualify us from influencing the lives of other people for God. In fact, most of us learn more from those who admit their mistakes. None of us can identify with teachers who pretend they always get everything right and are far superior to their students. We learn better from those who walk where we walk and stumble where we stumble but who are then able to say, “This is how you get up and this is how God helps you to go on.”

The next line in James 3:2 is a combination of sarcasm and seriousness. James imagines a teacher who says, “I’m perfect!”

Back to that college speech teacher I mentioned before. One day in a freshman speech class an 18-year-old asked the teacher how he became such a wonderful speaker who speaks so perfectly

with such a deep and melodious voice. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. At first I thought he was joking, but then I realized he was serious. And then the professor spent the rest of the hour explaining why he was so wonderful. I thought I would get sick listening to this.

It is to teachers like this that James sarcastically says, “*If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*” Who might that be? Can he be serious? Yes, there is truth to this statement. The tongue is hard to control, but if a person can get his or her mouth under control the chances are good for getting the body and all of life under control. In other words, anyone who wants to get life in order should start by working on the mouth.

What do you think when you hear someone talk and every third word is an obscenity or profanity? The Bible is saying that he can’t control his mouth and that means his whole life is out of control. Feel sorry for anyone whose mouth can’t be checked because the chances are that all of life is a wreck.

In his bestseller The Book of Virtues, William J. Bennett tells the story of Helen Keller who lost both her sight and her hearing from illness before she was two. She was imprisoned in her own mind and body. She was described as a “little savage” who was

“wild and unruly, giggling and chuckling to express pleasure; kicking, scratching, uttering the choked screams of the deaf-mute to indicate the opposite.” It was a miracle that this girl grew up to graduate *cum laude* from Radcliffe College and became a famous author, speaker and philanthropist. Bennett quotes Helen Keller’s autobiography (The Story of My Life) describing the day Anne Mansfield Sullivan arrived at Helen’s home:

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Ann Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between

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the two lives which it connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old.

She describes what it was like before her teacher came:

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was. "Light! give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shown on me that very hour.

Now the other side of the story. Ann Sullivan, her teacher, had a difficult student, unresponsive, and especially unaffectionate. In a P.S. to a letter penned on April 5, 1887, Anne Sullivan wrote:

Last night when I got in bed she stole into my arms of her own accord and kissed me for the first time and I thought my heart would burst, so full was it of joy.

It's a wondrous thing to be a teacher. And those who teach God's truth really do give light to those who are trapped in a wordless darkness.

It is true. Teaching should never be taken lightly. Know that those who teach will be judged more strictly, but also know that the teacher's heart can be so full that you think it will burst with joy!

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