

DO I STUMBLE OVER MY TONGUE?

James 3: 1-2 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

On a windswept hill in an old English churchyard stands a slate tombstone. The elements have almost erased the inscription, but the epitaph is still visible. It reads, “Beneath This Stone, a Lump of Clay, Lies Arabella Young. Who, on the Twenty-fourth of May, Began to Hold Her Tongue.” Sometimes it is death itself alone that gives people control over their tongues. During World War II, posters were seen all over America that read, “LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS.” The truth is, “loose lips do wreck lives.” People speak unguarded words and suddenly find themselves involved in an emotional, verbal, or physical fight. Our tongues are almost always forcing our bodies to come to our aid to defend ourselves. Most of us have often regretted our words, but seldom have we regretted our silence. We never listen ourselves out of a job. The best time for us to hold our tongue is when we feel we must say something or bust. Former president Calvin Coolidge once said, “If you don’t say anything, you won’t be called on to repeat it.”

James is very specific as he speaks of the tongue. So are the psalms and proverbs. Let me share with you ten Bible verses on the tongue, one from the Psalms and nine from Proverbs. Listen! Psalm 34:12-13 – “What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.” Proverbs 10:11 – “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. Proverbs 10:19 – “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” Proverbs 10:21 – “The lips of the righteous feed many...but fools die for lack of sense.” Proverbs 10:31 – “The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off.” Proverbs 11:12 – “Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent and holds their tongue.” Proverbs 12:18 – “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Proverbs 15:1 – “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Proverbs 15:4 – “The gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” Proverbs 16:23-24 – “The heart of the wise makes his speech, judicious, and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” Proverbs is full of many more truths about the tongue. Let’s dive into this introductory message on the tongue then.

James begins this section of his Epistle in chapter 3, verses 1-2, by sharing two strong convictions of the Holy Spirit that we all need to master. These two convictions are the overarching truths James uses to dive into this subject on the taming of our tongues. What are these two convictions and how will it change our

lives if we come to share James two initial convictions on the taming of our tongues? The first conviction relates to the dangerous occupation of teaching, and the second conviction relates to the most important way God wants to prevent us from stumbling in what we say. Let's look at these convictions. What are they?

WHAT CONVICTION MUST GOD'S PEOPLE LEARN IF WE ARE TO BECOME TEACHERS? ALL WHO TEACH WILL BE JUDGED WITH A GREATER STRICTNESS. (I.) Notice James 3: 1. "Not many of you should

become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Now James doesn't tell us the occasion for this first conviction and warning, but it would appear, that almost all the Jewish believers he wrote to, wanted to become teachers, preachers, and spiritual leaders. Perhaps, as today, the majority, of the believers he wrote to, were impressed by the authority and the prestige of the office of teaching, but they were forgetting, or they did not know the tremendous responsibility and accountability of being a teacher. Perhaps no profession as a believer is as liable to beget or bring on spiritual or intellectual pride as being known as a teacher. Often as teachers, we are teaching those who are young or who are younger in the faith than we are. So, we must always take care that we are teaching the truth, and not ever, teaching our own opinions, or even our own prejudices. Any teacher can, in a heartbeat, stoop to distort the truth, or stoop to contradict his teaching by his life, or stoop to saying, "Do as I say, but not as I do." As a teacher, we must ever avoid getting into a position of having our students hearing what we say, but being unable to understand it, because of who we are in our daily lives. The Jewish rabbis often said, "Not learning but doing is the foundation, and he who multiplies words, multiplies sin."

Beloved, words lie at the heart of the teaching ministries we have. To have an unreliable tongue is likely to provide a destructive model for all those who are taught. The potential for multiplication of a bad teaching influence is huge. So, teachers, and there are many of us here today who are teachers, we are to remember our profession is a special responsibility. If we fail in our teaching, James is saying we come under a stronger accountability. If any of us today are coveting the prestige and the honor or the place of being a teacher, James wants us to never forget the greater responsibility on our shoulders to be found faithful as a teacher. There are so many pitfalls for teachers of God's Word. We can move out of the center of the Word of God to the fringes, where we wish to camp, where we move into legalism, into speculation, into genealogies, Arminianism, Calvinism, into people-pleasing where we watch the reactions of our hearers, and we cater to certain folks and live in fear of their faces. As teachers of the Word, we are pre-eminently to be teachers of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must not bring dishonor on our faith or the Gospel with our whole lives being a contradiction with

our instruction. Amazingly, Many desire to be teachers before they themselves have been taught. Such teachers are easily swayed into pandering after the false desires and preferences of the crowd they teach—and soon the truth of the Word begins to be blunted and have no effect. Another temptation for every teacher is to be known for their version of the truth, rather than to be known for standing by the truth of the Word, whether it is popularly accepted or whether it stings its hearers.

Jesus spoke of how many of the Jewish Rabbis loved being called Rabbi, which not only means Teacher, but meant to most Jews, my great one. Thus, in Jesus' day or in James' day, to argue with the Rabbi, was to argue with God or His presence, His shekinah glory. In that day, to speak with the teacher of the law, to invite him to be your guest, to marry his daughter, all of these the Israelites considered the greatest honor. The young men, the Rabbi's disciples were expected to count it a glory to walk in the dust of their Teacher, their Rabbi, and to count it their glory to carry the Rabbi's burdens, to load his donkey, and to bring him a drink. Mixed motives abounded in James' day for being a teacher, and there are still mixed motives today for many to become teachers. James is saying in essence, "Don't crowd in on seeking to become a teacher. James too was a teacher, so he was warning himself as he taught. Paul shows how often each one in his day, went to worship in the hope of teaching. He wrote in I Corinthians 14: 26, "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, and an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up or edifying." James was speaking to a spirit of desiring to control and be in charge way back there in his day.

This conviction of James is vital to understand if we are to get the rest of James' teaching. James is saying the teacher must hold himself to a higher standard of conduct and a higher standard of declaring the Gospel. No teacher of the Word can teach it with the idea of a lick and a promise—a "that'll do" attitude. John Calvin ascended a high pulpit in his Geneva church. He said, "It would be better for me to fall and break my neck while climbing to the pulpit, than to preach the truth without first applying it to my own life." This conviction is well known, but we must say it today afresh. The teacher or preacher must practice what he teaches or preaches. The doctor must not neglect his own health. The accountant must balance his own checkbook. The attorney must not be in contempt of the law in his dealings. The cobbler's children's shoes must first be mended. The teacher who does not control his or her own tongue contradicts the teaching they proclaim.

But as I teach this message to us today, it is incumbent on me to have first studied the Greek word for teachers or as some translations, masters. The Greek word for

teacher is **didaskalos**. This word means instructor, master, doctor, teacher, to be as Paul says, a learning teacher, not a teacher of the same old, same old, old yellow notes. The word means him or her who causes others to learn and who effects learning. John Calvin said, “The common and almost universal interpretation of this passage is that the apostle discourages the desire for the office of teaching, and for this reason, because it is dangerous, it exposes one to a heavier judgment in case he transgresses...I (rather take teachers and) masters not to be those who performed a public duty in the church, but such (believers)as took upon themselves the right of passing judgment upon others, for such reprovers should seek to be accountable as teachers of their own morals/behavior.” Thus, Calvin says James is warning us against having censorious or critical tongues that are always seeking to set other people right. This is not a manifestation of true faith—to be always criticizing others, but rather of dead faith, for oftentimes people criticize others for the very things they themselves are guilty of. James had just finished talking about dead faith that doesn’t work, which would include dead teaching, not backed up by a teacher’s walk with the Lord. It reminds us of David bitterly condemning a rich man who stole a pet lamb, but he thought nothing of stealing his neighbor’s wife.

This meaning of being a teacher, or master, of morals or behavior is spoken to in other passages in the Word of God. Such a teacher as Paul and James spoke of, or Calvin refers to, is often today called a mentor—of morals and behavior. Paul takes on any such mentor or teacher who becomes a judge of other’s morals, but who does not live up to his own standard. Listen to Paul in Romans 2: 1-4! “Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Secondly,

WHAT CONVICION MUST GOD’S PEOPLE EMBRACE IF WE PLAN NOT TO STUMBLE IN WHAT WE SAY? ALL OF US STUMBLE IN WHAT WE SAY AND WE FAIL TO BE PERFECT MEN AND WOMEN

(II.) Notice James 3: 2. “For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” I love this part of James teaching, as he speaks on stumbling. James doesn’t write as a teacher or master or mentor of the Word who has “arrived.” He was conscious of his own shortcomings. As your pastor, so am I very conscious of my own shortcomings. James says, “For we all stumble in many ways.” If you are not aware of your own shortcomings, failings, sins, and stumblings, you have a false

perfectionism, that is pride gone to seed. Before Jesus rose from the dead, following the resurrection and he especially appeared to James, James was one of the half-brothers of Jesus who said of Him, in Mark 3: 21. It was when Jesus went to Nazareth, that His family heard it, and we read, “They went out to seize Him, for they were saying, “He is out of His mind.” James is saying to us that no one but Jesus, none of us are perfect men, including him. We have all stumbled with our tongues, and before today is over, many of us will do so again.

James is telling us that the perfect, mature man or woman is always able to “bridle” his tongue. He says such a person is the master of the whole body. The control of our tongues involves the ability to restrain our tongues in silence, but also to control our tongues in gracious speech. James in this conviction of his, was forced by the Holy Spirit into an important confession I beg you to join him in. Join with me. Nobody except Jesus has ever mastered or perfectly taught their tongue. James is really taking us back to his earlier theme in James 1: 19 and 26 where he said, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” James is calling me and you to live out our working faith by bridling our tongues. This is one of the chief proofs that our faith is real, saving, dynamic faith. Teachers and preachers cannot teach or preach without our tongues. If we lose our ability to speak, we lose our jobs. There is no delete button or undo, once we have spoken, taught, preached, and stumbling is inevitable for all of us.

Brides have stumbled walking down the aisle as preachers have stumbled walking up to the pulpit. Wide-receivers who are professionals have stumbled on the 20 yard line with no one between them and the goal line. The human race is a stumbling race as Ft. Worth Pastor Joel Gregory put it. Each of us stumble over our tongue, more than we stumble with our misplaced feet. And James is telling me afresh as well as you, that we humans are nowhere, more apt to stumble, than in our speech. The Greek word for stumble is a stumbling word to pronounce—**ptaio**. This word means to trip, to err, to offend, to sin, to stumble and to fall. It is embarrassing to trip, to stumble and fall, but we all do, and more often than not, it is not a broken hip for us, but a broken heart in us after our tongue has stumbled. Don’t misunderstand James. The Moody Press author, G. Coleman Luck, back in 1954, wrote, “This is not just a matter of offending a few “touchy” people. Some are so sensitive that it is impossible not to offend them sooner or later, no matter what one may do. James’ allusion is not to this, but to the fact that there are many obvious sins and failures in the lives of each of us which are manifest to all around us. How then can any individual afford to set himself up as a judge of others when

he himself is so full of imperfections? The old proverb puts it thus: “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

So, what is the take-home in all of these two strong convictions. Don’t sign up to be a teacher or preacher or superintendent or mentor unless you are prepared to be honest, pure, and loving in your lifestyle, both in deed and especially, in word. Leadership is a privilege and with privilege comes responsibility. God has called us as teachers to shape other’s lives for time and for eternity. He holds us doubly responsible because our lives and our words can either be God’s means of drawing people toward Jesus or our lives and our words can drive people away from Him. Have our lives by our tongues made us stumbling-blocks. No person will be able to stand before God and say, “You made me go to hell!” Yet, how many people have us as Christians to point to when they become bitter at God and the Gospel. Mark Twain finally in the end of his life became hostile to the Bible and to the Christian faith. His own mother was a saint as was his dear praying wife, but Mark Twain knew too many elders and deacons in the church who owned slaves and abused them. He heard those men using foul language and being dishonest in their words during the week and then piously going to testify in church on Sunday. He used stumbling believers as his worthless and bitter excuse for turning against God.

Teachers, always prepare, before you teach or admit to your people you are not prepared. Spend time in preparation. Study the Word even to teach little tiny ones. When asked a question, don’t punt, or make up an answer. Rather, promise to do research and get back with an answer from the Bible. Teachers, much teaching takes place outside the classroom. Parents and grandparents, you are all teachers, entrusted with children and grandchildren God has made you responsible for. Don’t take your parenting and mentoring lightly. Be careful what you say. Every morning, teachers, remember you are a fallen creature living in a fallen world, whose only way to not stumble in what you say, is to practice the presence of Jesus, to have the Holy Spirit’s presence, like a Dove, fly down and remain on you, as you speak without grieving Him. And teachers, when you stumble, don’t be awkward, and justify yourself and say, “You have bad eyes and ears. I didn’t stumble,” because that will be an even worse stumble.” Let it take no more than seconds for us as teachers to say, “Lord, forgive me.” “Sweetheart, I was wrong, forgive me.” “Brother or sister, I stumbled with my tongue. Please forgive me.”

Do you want to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you want a vibrant faith with holy fire? Start by getting your tongue under control. If you control your tongue, then you can control the other parts of your body. Tongue control and tongue bridling is the starting point for teachers and teaching Christian living.