

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Introduction

As we begin our time this morning, I want everyone to try to think of your favourite school teacher. Whether you're currently in school or whether you haven't stepped foot in a classroom in fifty years, chances are that most of us in this room won't have to think for very long before a clear answer comes into our minds. Teachers have a way of influencing us in powerful and amazing ways, especially during the formative years of our lives. If you think about it, teachers have an incredible amount of power, even when they aren't actively teaching in a classroom setting. Even some casual, throwaway words shared between a teacher and a student in the time between classes can have profound and even life-changing effects. Perhaps some of you have experienced something like this in your past. Words, for example, like, "have you ever considered going into engineering?" can change the trajectory of a person's life in significant ways when spoken by a teacher, and these words often seem to hold more power coming from them than they do coming from a friend, a relative, or even a parent. There's something amazingly powerful about a teacher's influence in our lives—especially the really good ones—that can not be ignored. Their words are extremely powerful and can effect great change. And if this is true for the teachers who taught us math, science, english, and history—if their words can change where we live, what school we go to, and what career path we end up on—how much more true is it to say that the words of a spiritual teacher—whose role is to proclaim truth to us and shepherd our souls into eternity—hold immense weight and power.

James understood the powerful influence of spiritual teachers for all of God's people, and he understood that their words hold an immense power that carries eternal consequences for those who sit under their teaching. He understood that teaching within the body of Christ is one of the most weighty responsibilities that a person could ever carry, and in our passage this morning, he wants to make sure that his hearers understand the weight of that responsibility correctly and understand

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2
CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

themselves rightly in relation to it. From these two verses, I want us to do three things this morning, and the first of them is this—I want us to **consider the weighty responsibility of teaching**.

Consider the Weighty Responsibility of Teaching

Beginning in verse 1 of Chapter 3, James writes, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*” Before we dig a little deeper into this verse, I think it would help us to remember the context of this passage and the situation into which James would have been writing. As Pastor Andrew has taught a number of times throughout this sermon series, James is most likely the earliest New Testament book. At this time, none of Paul’s letters would have been written, and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John would have still been many decades away from writing their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry. The church at this point would have been made up entirely of formerly-Jewish believers, and they would have all been relatively recent converts, owing to the fact that Jesus hadn’t even been gone for all that long by the time this book was written.

That means that this book has a very distinctly Jewish background to it, and that fact is instructive for us as we consider this verse. In the Jewish tradition, those given the role of teacher were called *Rabbis*, and they were highly esteemed, revered, and honoured all throughout Jewish society. The term *rabbi* literally translates to “my great one,” and people understood it was their duty to serve the rabbi even over their own families. In fact, one commentator even mentioned that back in James’ day, if you were a Jew and your rabbi, your mother, and your father were captured by an enemy and held for ransom, it would have been your sworn duty to ransom the rabbi first, even before your own parents!

The role of a teacher in James’ day was a role that afforded all kinds of respect, honour, and high esteem, far more even than it does today. We can understand then, why many people in the churches to which James was writing might have been motivated to aspire to that position, and we

could certainly understand that there could have been those whose aspirations were not rooted in pure, proper motives.

First and foremost, James wants to speak directly to those who would aspire to the position of teacher within the body of Christ, and he wants them to know that you need to be motivated by more than a desire to be respected, revered, and esteemed. You need to aspire this this position for the right reasons. Why? James tells us that not many people should become teachers, and he gives us a reason. That reason is that *“we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”*

Jesus spoke many times throughout his life and ministry about the judgement that would come to the world. He spoke in Matthew 12:36–37, for example, and said, *“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”* In Luke 12:2–3, Jesus said, *“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.”* Later on in that same chapter of Luke, Jesus also said, *“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.”*

Contrary to what many people in our world believe today, Jesus spent a fair bit of his time speaking about the judgement of God and warning people to be prepared for it. And along those same lines, the apostles who followed after Jesus wrote to the churches about these things as well. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, the apostle Paul said, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”* In Romans 14:10–12, Paul writes again, *“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”* So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” And finally, in perhaps one of the clearest and most well-known examples of this teaching in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15, Paul writes, *“For no one can*

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

Without question, then, we simply can not avoid the fact that the Bible teaches that a time of judgement is coming, and that God will judge each person according to their deeds. As if that isn't scary enough already, James wants his hearers to know that teachers in particular will be held to an even higher standard and be judged with even greater strictness. And why is that? While I'm not going to be spending too much time looking ahead to the rest of James 3 this morning because I don't want to spoil everyone about what's coming next week, the answer James clearly has in mind is because words are powerful, and words are especially powerful coming from teachers whose entire way of being is firmly rooted in speaking words most of the time.

And believe me, the irony is not lost on me this morning as I stand up to teach on a passage that says not many should be teachers because teachers will be judged more harshly. I must admit, while I am very happy that Pastor Andrew has been able to get away to some nice tropical weather, I'd be lying if I said that I hadn't thought to myself a few times this week that he sure did leave me a doozy of a passage to preach, didn't he? And yet, in all seriousness, is there any job in the entire world you can think of more important than a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ? There are many in this world who aspire to become pastors for the wrong reasons. Maybe you've known a few of them personally, and if you haven't, you could probably come up with a list of names in your own heads of people who abuse the position of a teacher in today's modern Christian world for their own benefit, to line their own pockets and to bask in the glory given to them by others.

When a teacher stands up to preach, he is being entrusted with the very words of God, the words that bring restoration to a broken world, that raise dead hearts, that save souls from eternal

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

judgement and bring people into new life in Christ for all eternity. Why would anyone ever want to take on that kind of responsibility flippantly, without really considering the weight of the task in front of them?

And so, if we have any young men in the room this morning who are considering becoming pastors, first and foremost, James is talking to you. He isn't trying to dissuade genuinely called, gifted, and humble people to the work of ministry, but he is trying to warn you that pastoral ministry is not a job to get into for the wrong reasons. You can get into a lot of jobs for the wrong reasons, but none of them come with a promise from God of harsher judgement at the end of all things. Consider the weight of that calling, brothers, and weigh your own motives carefully, because the implications are very serious indeed.

But the reality is that most of you here this morning are not young men thinking about going into ministry, so what does this passage have to say to everyone else here this morning? Well, I can think of a few things—

First, I think that understanding the weightiness and importance of teaching should drive us all to consider very carefully the teaching that we allow into our own lives. When it comes to our spiritual teachers, most of us get the opportunity to choose who we listen to and who we give our attention to. If spiritual teaching is so important that God has a special level of judgement for it in the last day, that should help us realize just how serious it really is. If you spend any of your time throughout the week listening to sermons, listening to Christian podcasts, or reading Christian books, I think this passage would highly commend that we spend considerable effort making sure that we are filling our lives with teaching that is beneficial, rightly motivated, and rightly faithful to God's word. We want to give our attention to those who will be judged faithful on the last day.

But this line of thinking goes beyond just what we listen to or read throughout the week. What about what we listen to on a Sunday morning? Many churches in God's kingdom, our own included, place at least some of the responsibility of selecting and confirming leaders in the hands of the congregation. As a member of this church, you have some say in those who are raised up as the elders, shepherds, and teachers among us. If nothing else, I think this first verse of James 3 should

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

inspire us all the more to take that responsibility seriously as we understand just how seriously God takes teaching in the church. And wherever you do find faithful, godly men who preach the word to you with proper motivation, with a humble heart, and with fidelity to the truth—let me encourage you to support, pray for, and encourage those men.

In particular—and I'm a guest preacher this morning, so I get to say things like this—the role of a preaching pastor is often more lonely and discouraging than you would think. Criticism tends to flow quite freely, and encouragement can sometimes be hard to come by. We here at CBC Ilderton have been deeply blessed with a faithful lead pastor whose works I believe will stand in the judgement and not be burned up on the last day. So, with our own lead pastor specifically in mind, who is not here in the building this morning, allow me to say again, wherever God blesses you with teachers like that, support them generously, love them dearly, and encourage them mightily, because that is a gift that we can never afford to take for granted.

Lastly though, I think this verse can also apply to most of us here this morning in a broader sense. If we zoom out from thinking about pastors for a moment, we realize that spiritual teaching in a church happens in more places than just the pulpit, doesn't it? Maybe you're a Sunday School teacher, or maybe you lead a Men's Group or a Women's Group. Perhaps you lead a life group. Many of us have opportunities to teach in the church apart from preaching, and if that's you this morning, I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Everything James says about stricter judgement in verse 1 applies to you this morning as well.

Maybe some of you are sitting there breathing a sigh of relief. You might think, "Well, I'm not a teacher, so I must be in the clear." But don't think you're out of the woods just yet either! If you have children here this morning—if you're a parent—is it not the case that your role is to be one of the primary spiritual teachers in their lives? And if you don't have kids, do you ever spend any time talking with your brothers and sisters after the service, perhaps giving them some spiritual encouragement or advice as they face difficult life circumstances? I don't think we would be totally mistaken to think about

these things as opportunities for teaching also. If your answer to any of those questions is, “yes,” then guess what? James is talking about you too!

Now, I am intentionally being a little bit silly here, but the point remains that when we slow down and really listen to what this verse is saying, it really is a little bit uncomfortable. It’s certainly uncomfortable for me standing up here, but it also starts to become more uncomfortable for all of us the more we realize that very few of us can fully dodge the responsibility of this verse and assume that it must only apply to someone else. James isn’t talking about someone else in this passage—he’s talking about you. Whether you chose the position of teacher or whether you find yourself in it for reasons mostly outside of your control, being a teacher is a serious and weighty position to be in, because it comes with enormous responsibility and a genuine threat of greater judgement. James wanted his readers to be sobered by that thought, and those of us here this morning thousands of years later are still a part of that intended audience.

And so here in the first verse of James 3, as we **consider the weighty responsibility of teaching**, we’re confronted with the fact that teaching of any sort in the church is an extremely serious reality, and we will all have to stand before God and give an account of how well we did it. I don’t know about you this morning, but I for one am very glad that I am preaching two verses instead of one this morning, because in the next verse, James shows us that there is a little more to the story. First, I wanted us to **consider the weighty responsibility of teaching**. Next, I want you to **realize your own imperfection**.

Realize Your Own Imperfection

Beginning in verse 2, James says, “*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.*” In case you were afraid that James was trying to tell us that we need to get everything perfectly right, we all get to breathe a collective sigh of relief as he admits that all of us—himself included—fail to live up to the weight of responsibility that we carry on our shoulders. We all stumble in many ways, James says, and

I'm sure that each one of us can attest strongly to the truth of that statement, particularly as it relates to our speech and to our words.

I've heard the story a thousand times before. I have stories like this, and I know that you have stories like this too. They always go something like this—"even as I heard the words leaving my mouth, I wished that I could catch them and shove them back inside." Some of you might be wincing or squirming a little bit in your seat as I've maybe brought to mind some particularly painful memories of the effect that our hurtful and destructive words can have on those around us.

Words have a way of entirely bypassing our brains sometimes, don't they? How often do we sin with our mouths against those we love, and how often do we do it before we've even had a chance to think about what we're saying? How often do our emotions get the better of us and cause us to verbally lash out in ways that surprise even us? When it comes to the use of our words, James says that we all stumble in many ways, and I think that all of us can collectively say a decisive "amen" to that, can't we?

James goes on to express that our speech is in fact such a powerful point of stumbling for us that purity of speech is perhaps the clearest and most definitive mark of spiritual maturity. In the second half of verse 2, he says, "*And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*" As we consider this, we would do well to remember back to James 1 verse 4, where James says that steadfastness in suffering is designed to make us perfect and complete. You've heard Pastor Andrew argue many times that this word "perfect" carries a different sense in biblical Greek than we often think about it in English. When we think of the word "perfect," we think of something that has no flaws whatsoever. Something that is perfect has nothing wrong with it, and therefore we would consider a perfect person to be someone who never sins. However, in the Greek, this word carries a much stronger sense of the fulfilment or completeness that comes when something has reached its intended goal. Think about it: when the writer of the book of Hebrews says in Hebrews 2:10 that Jesus was, "*made perfect through suffering*," he couldn't possibly mean that Jesus wasn't sinless before he suffered, right? No, surely this idea of being made perfect carries a different meaning, and that meaning is that Jesus was brought to full maturity and readiness for all that he was

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

ordained to accomplish through the suffering he experienced on this earth. There is a very real sense in which Jesus wasn't ready to accomplish his task until after he experienced suffering. The word "mature" maybe best capture the nuance of what "perfect" means here in a way that rings a little clearer to our modern English ears.

And so, James is saying that if anyone doesn't stumble in what he says, he is a mature man. That is to say—do you want to know what a mature Christian looks like? More than anything, James tells us that spiritual maturity can be discerned by considering a person's words even above their conduct. In fact, James says that if you can control your mouth, you can pretty much control anything else about yourself too. The mouth is the hardest thing of all to control—something that you'll see James talks a lot more about in the next few verses—and so if anyone can get a handle on that thing, you can be pretty confident that they've probably got a handle on everything else too.

But we don't have a perfect handle on our mouths, do we? Nor do we always have much of a handle on many other parts of ourselves either. James is right, "*if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*" But I can tell you this morning that certainly isn't me, and I'm pretty sure it isn't anyone else in this room either. And so, we need to **realize our own imperfection**, and we also need to realize that God's standard of judgement doesn't change just because we aren't perfect. James' earlier point from verse 1 still stands—we will all stand before the judgement seat of God, and those of us who have been given any responsibility to teach in any capacity will be held to a stricter standard. Not only that, but James has just told us that we are all but guaranteed to screw it up, quite possibly spectacularly. And so is that it? We're all just going to stand before God in judgement, and we're guaranteed to fail? There's nothing good at all about that news, but I'm thankful that even as we consider our absolute inability to stand before the judgement of God in our own righteousness, we've already heard from James himself in chapter 2, verse 13, that "*mercy triumphs over judgment.*" I wanted us to **realize our own imperfections**, but finally this morning, I want us to **look to the perfect teacher**.

Look to the Perfect Teacher

It turns out that there was exactly one human being in all of history who, as James says, did not stumble in what he said. Indeed, he was a perfect man, and he was indeed able to bridle his whole body perfectly every moment of his life from birth to death. I am speaking, of course, about our great Saviour Jesus Christ. He is the one who, from the very beginning, has always succeeded wherever and whenever his people failed. He is the one who, like Moses, stands in the gap between God and his people and mediates mercy and forgiveness to sinful, broken, imperfect people who stand under the righteous judgement of God. In his death, all of our failures of speech, all of our failures as teachers in any capacity, and all of our failures in every other way are completely forgiven and washed away. In Jesus we are cleansed, but we need more than a clean slate to stand before God in the judgement, especially as those who stand before stricter judgement as teachers. We don't just need a clean slate, we need to come to God with real, genuine righteousness. And not only does Jesus' death bring us forgiveness, but his perfect life gives us that righteousness. As we stand before God, Jesus clothes us in his perfect obedience. We are judged not on the basis of our own performance, but on the basis of his performance as our perfect Saviour.

One of my favourite chapters in the whole Old Testament is Zechariah 3. In that chapter, Zechariah sees a vision of Joshua the high priest standing before God. Here's how the story goes. He writes, *"Then God showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?"* Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, *Remove the filthy garments from him.*" And to him he said, *Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.*" And I said, *Let them put a clean turban on his head.*" So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by."

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

When we are united to Christ by faith, our filthy garments are removed, and we are instead clothed with pure garments of perfect righteousness. We could never stand before God's judgement seat in our own righteousness, but we don't have to. We stand before God clothed in Jesus' perfect obedience. It will be as if we had perfectly obeyed, in every way, every moment of our lives from beginning to end. And so even though we fail, spectacularly at times, and rightly bring judgement upon ourselves, in Christ we can look to the day of judgement with full assurance that we will hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant."

In the midst of our own failures and our own brokenness, we must **look to the perfect teacher** and find rest in the good news of his life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. And when we do, we suddenly find ourselves freed from the burden of guilt, shame, and dread. Instead of seeing the weighty responsibility of teaching with eyes of fear, we can pursue excellence and obedience in our teaching from a foundation of safety, security, and trust. We can embrace the immense responsibility we have been given as teachers with joy, because when God's people operate from a place of safety, security, and rest, suddenly God's commands become a delight, and we desire to obey out of love for him and out of thankfulness for his great mercy and grace toward us in Christ, not to earn our favour or standing before him and not to earn our own acceptance on the day of judgement.

Conclusion

God grants each one of us a powerful opportunity to use our words to influence people with the great truths of his word. Wherever we have been called to teach, whether we are pastors, Sunday School teachers, life group leaders, parents, older siblings, or just friends with our fellow brothers and sisters, we are given an opportunity to have a profound spiritual influence on those who may very well think about us when some preacher in the far future begins their sermon by asking them to think about their favourite teacher. Even in our weakness, we can be confident that God can and will use us mightily for the building up of his church and for the advancement of his kingdom. And so, let us consider with sober minds the weighty responsibility that we carry anywhere we are given the

The Weighty Responsibility of Teaching – James 3:1-2

CBC Ilderton

Luke Burrow
February 11, 2024

opportunity to use our words to teach the great and glorious truths of God, and in spite of our weakness and imperfection, let us joyfully embrace the delight of being used by God in the lives of others as we fix our eyes on our perfect Saviour, the perfect Teacher, who will faithfully carry us all the way to the end. Let's pray.