

LESSON FIVE

Be Not Many of You Teachers, cont'd

At this point James has carried on the discussion of “slow to speak: (1:19). He has just been writing about idle faith in 2:14-26, and now he proceeds to expound the peril of the idle word, wrong speech after wrong action. Indeed, in 1:26 he has already mentioned the failure to bridle the tongue as a sure sign of vain religion. Now he expands the matter in a remarkable paragraph.

One area in which the tongue is apt to go awry is with teachers. We must not think simply of teachers like Paul’s apostles, prophets, teachers (1 Cor. 12:28 f.; Eph. 4:11). In the *Didache* (xiii.2, xv 1, 2¹) teachers are placed on par with prophets and higher than bishops and deacons. There is no doubt that teaching received tremendous emphasis in the work of the early Christians. Jesus is the great Teacher of the ages and is usually presented as teaching. In the Jewish “houses of learning” (synagogues) teaching was as prominent an element as worship. The official teachers passed away, and the modern Sunday school movement is an effort to restore the teaching function in the churches.

¹ *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It is one of the most important discoveries of the second half of the nineteenth century. There are several references in early Christian literature to a book with this or a similar title, and by applying the methods of comparative criticism to documents which had probably made use of it, especially the “Apostolic Constitutions” and the “Church Ordinances,” a rough reconstruction of some of its features had been obtained; but it was not known to be extant until Bryennios in 1875 discovered it in the Patriarchal library of Jerusalem at Constantinople.

The passage quoted reads:

15. Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. (2) You must not, therefore, despise them, for they are your honored men, along with the prophets and teachers.

Teachers are necessary in the church, yet they must be ready and willing to speak that which needs to be heard rather than pandering to the hearers. Paul spoke of those who would do the latter: “³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; ⁴And they shall turn away *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). The *Shepherd of Hermas* spoke of the same danger: “Because of this arrogance of theirs, understanding has left them and a foolish stupidity has taken possession of them. Yet they praise themselves for having wisdom and want to be volunteer teachers, foolish though they are.”²

James is speaking of the “unofficial” teachers in the churches. Some were apparently of arrogant convictions and little knowledge, but felt that they had no need to learn anything from their brethren. They considered themselves to be fully equipped as teachers. Paul apparently came across some with the same disease of whom he said that they “desir[ed] to be teachers of the law, though they underst[oo]d neither what they said], nor whereof they confidently affirm[ed] (1 Tim. 1:7).

Some with fluency of speech really had no message and only spoke out of vanity and really thought more of the admiration that they might excite by a display of their powers than of the light and strength that through God’s grace they might give their brethren. Evidently James is here concerned with these promiscuous, officious, irresponsible, self-appointed teachers with a cocksure explanation of all difficulties and not afraid to rush in where angels fear to tread.

² Holmes, M. W. (1999). *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations* (Updated ed.) (507). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

The world is full of roving teachers with every sort of ism to dispense to the public. Both Jews and Athenians were eager for something newer than the last stale theory (the very latest fad). The synagogues of the Jews and the churches of the Christians offered a fine platform for these cranks to air their notions. Besides, some of the best of men, earnest Christians, have a “lust for talk” that leads them into all sorts of excesses.

James, therefore, is pleading for restraint and moderation when he says, “Be not many of you teachers,” or as Moffat translates it, “Do not swell the ranks of the teachers.” Teachers are absolutely necessary, but the thing can be overdone. Some learners (disciples) are needed. Liberty within reasonable limits must be allowed, but not rank license. Men must not be too eager to teach what they do not know.

There is no danger of an oversupply of well-equipped teachers, who are masters of the message of Christ. There are still too many who are unqualified and unwilling to become so. Therefore, the accent on teacher training is essential. The caution of James is pertinent today, but we must not discourage timid souls who can learn to teach and who ought to undertake it. The greatness of the teacher’s task must not be overlooked. James warns us against its abuse. There is a mental sloth that is as bad as this eagerness to be teachers, a lazy satisfaction with the elements of Christianity and failure to grow into the position of teachers of the doctrines of grace, continuing as babes unable to digest solid food (Heb. 5:12).

Teaching has to be done. There is no escape from that, but those who teach must understand their responsibility. They are doctors of the mind and heart. They cannot escape their responsibility as spiritual surgeons, for they deal with the issues of life and death, ”knowing that we shall receive a heavier judgment.” In seasons of religious excitement it is particularly

desirable that teachers shall bear this fact in mind. There is danger for the teacher and for those that hear and are led astray by foolish talk.

Feeling was probably running high in some of the churches, and there was occasion for the sobering words of James. The penalty of untruth is untruth, to imbibe which is death. One has only to recall the words of Jesus: “And I say unto you, that for every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned (Matt. 12:36 f.). It is easy to be overconfident, like the complacency of the Jews of whom Paul said that each was confident that he was “a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of babes” (Rom. 2:20). It is bad enough to break one of the least commandments, but whoever does “and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

There is no escaping the fact that a heavier penalty rests on preachers and teachers who leave a trail of error behind them. This can be done in two ways. The “trail of error” left behind can be either the direct teaching of error (knowingly or unknowingly) or a failure to teach against error (because of ignorance of its existence or knowing of its existence and intentionally avoiding it). In the days of the New Testament Christians dealt with Pharisaism, Gnosticism, Mithraism³, the emperor cult, and a hundred and

³ The god Mithra has a complex past extending back to ancient India, where he was a god of truth and light. He also became very popular in Persia, where again he was associated with truth and with contracts between persons. During the Hellenistic period, there is evidence of a cult of Mithra at Commagene in the south of Turkey. Here, Mithra is identified with the sun, and astrology is used in the construction of what the cult perceived to be its cosmic dimensions.

How the mystery cult of Mithra arose in Rome in the late 1st century A.D. is unclear. Some would argue that the cult gradually developed from the Persian worship of Mithra, while others attribute the cult’s invention to an individual or a group of people acquainted with Persian religion. Indeed, there are similarities between the Persian worship of Mithra

one other vagaries of the age. Certainly a teacher must speak his mind. He must be intellectually honest and tell what he sees, but he is not called upon to give his guesses at truth as truth. He ought to be interesting if he can, but not at the expense of truth. Freedom of teaching is quite consonant with fidelity to truth. One does not have to be a mere traditionalist in order to escape wild speculation. He must bring forth things new and old if they are true.

The severest words that fell from the lips of Jesus are against the Pharisees who filled the place of teachers for the Jews but who “say and do not,” who “sit on Moses’ seat” as authoritative teachers and yet “strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel” (Matt. 23:2-3, 24). “Woe to you lawyers! For ye took away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered” (Luke 11:52). The child was kept in the dark while at school because the teacher did not let in the light.

and the mystery cult, but there are also a great many differences. The iconography of the mystery cult, e.g., is pervaded by Greco-Roman astrological and astronomical images.

As the cult was closed and private, there is very little literary evidence describing how it functioned. There are, however, numerous Mithra monuments including the caves in which the members of the cult would worship their god. These caves (Mithraea) can be found in Rome and throughout the empire as the cult was very popular among soldiers, slaves, and freedmen. Only men could join the cult, and the iconography indicates that once initiated into the mysteries, a man could gradually ascend a symbolic ladder of grades. These initiation and ascension ceremonies were also connected with concerns about the afterlife.

With the triumph of Christianity, the worship of Mithra disappeared. Some Mithraea have been discovered, however, often underneath the churches that were built over them.

Tools For The Teacher

Years ago I decided that I could do a lot of things I had never done before if I just had the proper tool tools. It was probably made partly in desperation because I had absolutely no experience in what I was about to undertake and I had no exposure to any experience on the part of any of my greater family – certainly not from my father. That is not to disparage my father – he was one of the best men I ever knew. In fact, he was the best man I ever knew. My mother believed to his dying day that his cutting grass for widows in the Texas summer heat contributed to his death just six months short of their 50th anniversary. On the other hand, he hardly knew which end of the hammer to hold. On one occasion while my mother was visiting in Houston, my father decided to fix the light over the kitchen sink. When mother returned, he proudly displayed his successful venture into the realm of home repair. Mother was pleased, but she asked him if he had remembered to turn off the electricity before he began. His sheepish look told her that his success had been a shocking experience.

With that background let me get back to my story. We were living in Lubbock and after we had been there a while decided that we needed another bedroom. We couldn't afford to add on to the house or pay a professional to do what we had decided to do – convert half of our attached garage into a

bedroom. Off I went to the hardware store (Home Depot and Lowes did not exist.) and came home with power saws and power drills and hammers and screwdrivers and anything else that I could imagine I might need. The lumber was ordered. The work was done. It was Eric's room until we moved. By the time we moved to Houston I had enough courage to convert half of our garage into a playroom with air conditioning. I actually wired the entire operation, tied it into the main power box, and did not get shocked. Of course, by that time I had a woodworking shop in the other half. Jessalyn still has a piece of furniture I made, including making the decorative trim. Now all of that has been long gone, but it did prove to me that I can do a lot of things if I am willing to buy the equipment, acquire instruction books on "how to," obtain the proper tools, and "have at it." I still stand amazed in the presence of some of the things that I can do around the house.

I have said all of that to say this – To be able to teach Bible Study you must have the correct tools. One could have the best of attitudes, the best of intentions, and an undying love for Christ and His Word, but absent the proper tools and the proper amount and types of tools will never be able to succeed as a teacher of the Bible.

That may sound harsh, but would you take your car to a mechanic who had only one wrench? Would you pay full tuition to enroll your child

in a university where the freshmen were taught by the sophomores who had read the book once and sat through the course? Would you go to a doctor who had no equipment in his office but a stethoscope? In you would do none of these things, then why would you consider yourself to have sufficient tools to teach a Bible Study class when you have only one little book beyond the Bible? True, the Bible is the basic tool and it is the final authority, but the well rounded, efficient teacher will obtain other helpful books that will broaden knowledge, deepen understanding, and better equip the teacher to apply the eternal Word to an ever changing and increasingly complex society. Churches should be building a good library for their teachers and members, but the teacher should be building a personal library at home.

What do adequate tools (books) provide for the teacher? Charles Spurgeon⁴ gives great insight:

⁴*Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (1834-92) was England's best-known preacher for most of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1854, just four years after his conversion, Spurgeon, then only 20, became pastor of London's famed New Park Street Church. The congregation quickly outgrew their building, moved to Exeter Hall, then to Surrey Music Hall. In these venues Spurgeon frequently preached to audiences numbering more than 10,000—all in the days before electronic amplification. In 1861 the congregation moved permanently to the newly constructed Metropolitan Tabernacle.

When Charles Spurgeon died in January 1892, London went into mourning. Nearly 60,000 people came to pay homage during the three days his body lay in state at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Some 100,000 lined the streets as a funeral parade two miles long followed his hearse from the Tabernacle to the cemetery. Flags flew at half-staff and shops and pubs were closed.

It would be easy to point out the deficiencies of the modern pulpit, and hold up one's own ideal of what preaching ought to be, but this has been so often attempted by others with such slender results that we decline the task. A judicious critic would probably complain that many sermons are deficient in solid instruction, Biblical exposition, and Scriptural argument: they are flashy, rather than fleshy; clever, rather than solid; entertaining, rather than impressive. He would point to rhetorical discourses in which doctrine is barely discernible, and brilliant harangues from which no food for the soul could ever be extracted. Having done this, he would probably propose that homilies should flow out of texts, and should consist of a clear explanation, and an earnest enforcement of the truths which the texts distinctly teach. Expository preaching he would advocate as the great need of the day, its best protection against rising errors, and its surest means of spiritual edification. To such observations most of us would offer no opposition; we should confess them to be full of wisdom, and worthy of being pondered. We should not unite in any indiscriminate censuring of hortatory addresses, or topical sermons, nor should we agree with the demand that every discourse should be limited to the range of its text, nor even that it should have a text at all; but we should heartily subscribe to the declaration, that more expository preaching is greatly needed, and that all preachers would be the better if they were more able expounders of the inspired Word.

To render such a result more probable, every inducement to search the Holy Scriptures should be placed in the way of our ministers, and to the younger brethren some guidance should be proffered as to the works most likely to aid them in their studies. Many are persuaded that they should expound the Word, but being unversed in the original tongues they can only fall back

All this for a Victorian minister—who also happened to be the most extraordinary preacher of his day.

His formal education was limited, even by nineteenth-century standards: he attended local schools for a few years but never earned a university degree. He lived in Cambridge for a time, where he combined the roles of scholar and teaching assistant and was briefly tutored in Greek. Though he eschewed formal education, all his life he valued learning and books—especially those by Puritan divines—and his personal library eventually exceeded 12,000 volumes.

upon the help of their English Concordances, and are left floundering about, when a sound comment would direct their thoughts. True, the Holy Spirit will instruct the seeker, but he works by means. The Ethiopian eunuch might have received divine illumination, and doubtless did receive it, but still, when asked whether he understood the Scripture which he read, he replied, “How can I unless some man shall guide me?” The guiding man is needed still. Divines who have studied the Scriptures have left us great stores of holy thought which we do well to use. Their expositions can never be a substitute for our own meditations, but as water poured down a dry pump often sets it to work to bring up water of its own, so suggestive reading sets the mind in motion on its own account.

Why then do teachers not have more tools?

- They are expensive.
- Members of the church do not write them.
- They may contain error and I might not be able to recognize it and respond to it.
- I don't have the time to read a bunch of books in class preparation.

Whoever wrote the little book has already done the research and saved me the time.

- I have access to the church library and it even has a computer Bible program.

-- To Be Continued

