



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

A Command Taken Too Seriously?

James 3:1-2

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Introduction

1. Howard Hendricks, longtime professor in Christian education at Dallas Theological Seminary, once told about a woman he met at a conference for Bible school teachers.
 - a. She was a widow who had long desired to attend such a conference, but had been prohibited because there were none close enough to where she lived. For that one, she had bought a bus ticket and ridden all night to be on time for that morning's workshops.
 - b. He also learned that she taught a junior high boys class with thirteen students, about 1/4 of the 55 total enrolled in that church's Sunday school.
 - c. Oh, one more thing. Hendricks confessed that when he met her, he wrongly guessed her age to be about 65. She probably wasn't insulted. She was 83!¹
2. As I read her story:
 - a. I marveled at her passion for teaching and the church's teaching ministry.
 - b. I remembered others I have known who showed such passion even though they were approaching or were into their retirement years.
 - c. And I thought how her passion, commitment and desire for excellence in the teaching ministry differed from others I have met over the years.
3. In light of such thoughts, I think again of James's command in 3:1 and marvel at how seriously some have apparently taken it.
 - a. We are a people who seek a "thus says the Lord" for our practices. Surely, then, some with talent must be using James to justify their practice since they will not be teachers.
 - b. I'm being facetious, but in the off chance that some would use the verse that way, let me emphatically say that is *not* what James meant. Let's think about it more.

Body

- I. Understanding James – and the New Testament.
 - A. That James doesn't mean to demean the place of teaching is evident from the fact that he was writing a letter aimed to *teach*.

¹ This story is taken from quotations of a taped message delivered by Hendricks at College Church in Wheaton, IL in June 1984. The passage is quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 132.

- B. We'll understand James better when we see how Jews and Christians esteemed teaching.
1. Literally meaning, "O revered (or great) One," "a *raḥ* or *rabbī* in the Judaism of the time of Christ had the task of expounding the Torah and of giving rulings in matters of the law. He had pupils (*talmuḏīm*) who studied his exposition and his rulings and were in duty bound to respect and obey their teacher."²
 2. In the first century A. D., "rabbi" "became the exclusive term for an officially appointed teacher of the law" (Wegenast, 767).
- C. The earliest Christians understood the importance of teaching.
1. The article on "Teach" in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* covers 19 different words.
 2. The word James uses (διδάσκαλος, *didaskalos*) appears 59 times; 41 refer to Jesus (29 in a direct address). God's unique Son was a teacher.
 3. The first Christians were first to be devoted to "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42).
 4. Various texts show a special role for teachers (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11); Paul included the term along with "preacher" and "apostle" in his self-description (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11).
- D. Given that background, it's evident that James's warning is designed to counter the wrong kind of ambition and a failure to take the task of teaching seriously.
1. As one charged with the task of passing on the doctrine of the faith (2 Tim. 2:2) "a certain authority and prestige naturally adhered to the teaching ministry. Particularly was this so in a society where few people could read and where people in the lower classes had few opportunities for advancement in status. It is not surprising, then, that Christians were attracted to the teaching ministry. Concern about believers flocking to this ministry for the wrong reasons probably lies behind James' warning: *Let not many of you become teachers.*"³
 2. James reminds his readers that, "Increased responsibility means increased accountability" (Hughes, 128). Because teachers by definition talk so much, they are especially susceptible to the dangers caused by the tongue.
 3. Furthermore, there was danger in focusing on the prestige of teaching, not just that of pride (real enough), but also of slack attention to the task.
 - a) "Religious teachers in James's world were those who passed on sacred tradition. Their key task was to learn it accurately and transmit it exactly. Only after written texts or oral traditions were correctly memorized were disciples of a rabbi ready to discuss them, lest they misrepresent them unwittingly."⁴
 - b) Put another way, teachers needed to understand that the fundamental prerequisite for being a good teacher was being a good student.

II. Serious About Teaching.

- A. First, we need to think more broadly than "Sunday school."

² K. Wegenast, "Teach," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 766-767.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 119.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 152. For more detail, the authors recommend Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus, the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1994).

1. The first Christians understood that consistent, thorough teaching was mandatory if they were going to grow mature disciples in that pagan culture.
 - a) "It can be argued successfully that all NT documents have for at least one of their purposes that of instructing Christians in their identity and required behavior, facilitating their growth and defense against threats to their faith."⁵
 - b) By the second century, the church was engaged in catechetical instruction designed to prepare people for baptism so they would not be "wet pagans" (Slate, 1). This practice developed over the centuries.
2. Some may be put off by the word "catechism," but it's easier to find a form of that word in Scripture than "Sunday school" or "midweek Bible study."⁶
 - a) "Catechism" comes from the verb *κατηχέω* (*katēcheō*), used eight times in seven verses (note especially Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 14:19; Luke 1:4; also Acts 18:24; 21:21, 24; Rom. 2:18); it means teach, instruct, pass on information.
 - b) Serious attention to that concept gave rise to later catechetical instruction.
 - c) They knew the instruction had to be purposeful and thorough so converts could defend the faith in a hostile culture (e.g., 1 Pet. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:15).
3. Would anyone seriously suggest:
 - a) That our culture is not also resistant?
 - b) That it's possible some find "catechism" so distasteful may have more to do with not wanting to invest the time and energy into such an effort?⁷
 - c) That "Sunday school" as often done barely begins to do what is needed?
- B. If we are going to include Sunday school in our teaching ministry, do it better.
 1. A church not far from us bases student promotion on demonstrated proficiency.
 - a) Tests? Passing? Do we dare?
 - b) A better question: what does what we do say about the importance we attach to our program?
 2. If a church collectively is really serious about Sunday school as a vital tool:
 - a) Shouldn't class attendance be nearer to 100% of assembly attendance than 60% (or 45-50% at mid-week)?
 - b) Wouldn't all who come bring a Bible (whether printed or electronic)?
 - c) Shouldn't being punctual (even early) be at least as important as it is for other things we think are important?
 - d) Shouldn't it be easier to find willing teachers? Imagine, a surplus!
 - e) Shouldn't teachers expect participation in assignments to study outside of class instead of never asking for outside class work in the knowledge that few will bother?

⁵ C. Philip Slate, "The Stabilization of New Converts in our Age," Unpublished outline distributed at a Memphis, Tennessee area preachers meeting, August 2, 2011, p. 1.

⁶ My point here is that the terms "Sunday school" and "midweek Bible study," though descriptive of authorized practices, do not appear in the New Testament. In contrast, "catechism" is transliterated from *κατηχέω* (*katēcheō*), which is a New Testament term.

⁷ The instruction does not have to be formal or in a classroom. Slate tells of a former student who said that while he was in high school he went to an elder's home one day a week for one-on-one instruction.

- f) Wouldn't teachers make it habit to spend time building an overflow of knowledge and understanding instead of picking up the book the night before or day of class?
- 3. In a 52-week year of Sunday morning classes – 45 minutes in duration (assuming classes meet every week) — we will spend 39 hours in group Bible study (out of 8,736 total hours during those 52 weeks).
 - a) Do we really think that will [a] cover the Word and [b] prepare our kids (and us) for the world we face?
 - b) On the other hand, does this not tell us that, since our time is so limited, we ought to make sure we really do a first rate job with Sunday school?

Conclusion

1. In my early years of ministry, I came across a book in a bookstore entitled, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*. I bought and read it, and noted several areas where I thought Scripture had been misrepresented or mis-applied. But, I found helpful its material on building a church where people stand strong and engage actively in ministry. Two things stood out.
 - a. The next full-time staff member added after the evangelism minister was a minister of education.
 - b. Chief among his tasks was to establish what they called “a seminary for the laity” in which members would be expected to take more than 220 units in courses on the Bible text, Theology and History, Defending the Faith and Practical Ministry.⁸
2. Over its first fifteen years, that church grew from two members to thousands. Two ironies stand out as I think about that church, its reputation, and that book.
 - a. The church is the Garden Grove Community Church, founded by Robert Schuller. Its critics attributed its growth solely to gimmickry and shallow theology. Those criticisms had merit, but Schuller's emphasis on education would suggest that there was far more to their growth than glitz.
 - b. More significantly, although many who criticized Schuller were among those who insist we should be identified as a people of the Book, there has not been a widespread effort to do something even minimally like Schuller's “seminary for the laity.”⁹ In many cases, the effort to even build the best possible Sunday school has been minimal at best.
3. We can't change the past, but we make a commitment to do better in the future. Let's move closer to a teaching ministry that is the best it can be. Those of us who can should step up and do, apply ourselves to learning to do it better, and keep doing it as long as we are able or until the Lord comes. That will matter long after the other things that concern us are forgotten.

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⁸ The name they assigned to this effort was “C.A.L.L.”, Center for Advanced Lay Leadership.

⁹ An effort that is similar to the Bible training schools many of our missionaries make a priority.