

# A Warning to Would-Be Teachers

by Alistair Begg

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*Alistair Begg warns against the presumption of becoming a teacher, highlighting the significant responsibilities and stricter judgment associated with the role.*

**Duration:** 33:27

**Scripture:** Proverbs 18:21, Proverbs 21:23, Jeremiah 45:5, Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 4:29, James 3:1-2

**Topics:** "Warning"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of accountability for those who teach the word of God. He explains that teachers will not only be judged for the content of their teaching, but also for their conduct and motivations. The speaker uses the example of Ezekiel being appointed as a watchman over Israel, highlighting the responsibility to warn others of their sins. He also discusses the challenges faced by teachers and the need for honesty in acknowledging mistakes. Overall, the sermon emphasizes the need for teachers to fulfill their role with clarity, openness, and integrity.

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## Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at [truthforlife.org](http://truthforlife.org). James chapter 3 and verse 1. 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. Before we turn to that, we pray together. Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord.

Keep watch over the door of my lips. For Jesus' sake. If I asked you to list the top five most dangerous occupations in the country, I would be very surprised if teaching found its way into that list.

We might say fireman, we might say bomb disposal expert, construction worker on high-rise buildings, a miner, perhaps even a surgeon, and so on. But it is unlikely that anyone would assume that teaching would fall within that category. And yet, here we discover that James introduces the subject of teaching with a very striking warning because of the danger which he sees to be inherent in the task.

At the end of chapter 1, he gave to us, in verse 26, three marks of genuine religion or Christian experience that is real. One was a caring heart, the other was an uncompromised testimony, and in the middle, a

controlled tongue. And it is as we come to chapter 3 that he gives the fullest treatment to this matter of the use and abuse of the tongue.

And the first twelve verses of chapter 3, you will see, are taken up with this subject. The way in which he leads into it, into the general treatment of the tongue, is by paying specific attention to the task of the teacher. And he wants his readers to understand that nobody should just be volunteering too quickly to fulfill that role.

And he points out to us two things that I want you to notice. First of all, that it is a significant task, and secondly, that it is a serious task. The responsibility of the Christian teacher in the fledgling church was really closely akin to that of the rabbi in a Jewish congregation.

And Jewish parents at that time, and indeed in Orthodox circles and perhaps beyond to this day, would be delighted if their son grew up to fulfill the role of a rabbi, because a rabbi has both status and influence and privilege. And yet, here James suggests that one ought to be very, very careful about assuming the rabbinic responsibilities, the role of the didaskaloi, which is plural for the teacher here, because of what attaches to it. I think it's Willie Nelson who has a song that goes along the lines of mothers, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys.

And James, I think, would be saying much the same thing. Don't let your babies grow up to be teachers. He certainly is warning here against this because of the significance of the task.

In the early church, before we had the Gospels in people's hands, before we had the writings beyond the writings of the Old Testament in the hands of people, teachers were absolutely crucial. The literacy rate at that time was probably only 10 or 15 percent, and so people were unable to go and look things up. They were unable to go and verify things for themselves, and they would be forced to go to the teacher and ask the teacher, If you have had experience of this, then you will know.

If you haven't, then like me, you would have to go to *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is my go-to movie for all matters as it relates to rabbis. And you will remember that they go to the rabbi all the time, which incidentally in passing is an indication of how poor my education is. But nevertheless, I remember them going to the rabbi in that movie all the time.

Rabbi, what about this? Rabbi, what about that? Rabbi, do you have a blessing for the czar? Yes, may God bless the czar and keep him as far away from us as possible. I remember that in the movie. But they would go to the teacher to inquire.

And in the same way, with the transference of things into the fledgling church, people would come and say perhaps to the teacher, Why did Jesus die upon the cross? And the teacher, who himself was the learner, would then be able to let the individual know that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. The scriptures that he, the teacher, has read and paid attention to. The whole of the New Testament pulsates with this notion.

Paul warns in his first letter to Timothy against those who fancy the idea of becoming teachers and yet they don't know what they're talking about. 1 Timothy 1, verse 7, he says, Some have wandered away and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they're talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

So they've got a very zealous interest in becoming a talker, but they don't have anything to talk about, they've nothing useful to say, and frankly they're a downright nuisance. Not everybody who stands behind one of these pulpits stands here by the appointment of God. Let not many of you desire the teaching office, says James.

The consonant is important, it's M, you know. It's the same phraseology that Paul uses when he describes the Corinthians. Not many among you were of noble birth or of significant background.

He didn't say not any, there were those, but it wasn't the majority, and it's the same phraseology here. We need teachers in the church, we need those who've been appointed by God, but James says this is such a significant role that people ought not to be clustering at the door, as it were, to volunteer for it. 2 Timothy 2.2 is the reverse, if you like, of 1 Timothy 1.7. The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

So you do not assume this role, you're appointed to this role, God appoints you to this role, and the teaching role is along there with the role of the evangelist and the prophet and the foundational role of apostleship in the church as it begins. It is, then, a role of significance. It is, at the same time, a role which is serious, serious.

That's why he issues this warning as he leads into his subject matter. In the introduction to the marriage ceremony, at least in the Anglican prayer book, the minister says to the couple, in prospect of marriage, it is not to be entered upon lightly or carelessly, but thoughtfully, with reverence for God, and with due consideration of the purposes for which it was established by God. And the same is true in terms of entering into the responsibilities and privileges of a teaching role within the church.

That, I think, follows through every aspect of it, but I would imagine that James has in mind here this very specific and formal function, such as you find in Ephesians 4, where God has given through Jesus the ascended Christ to the church the gifts of the ascended Christ, one of those gifts being the role of pastor and of teacher. It is a wonderful responsibility. It is a dreadful responsibility.

And what makes it so significant and so serious is that the tool of the trade for the teacher opens the door to error, mistakes, confusion, because it is the use of the tongue. A person who uses a very significant piece of instrumentation has a responsibility to ensure safety. And everywhere you go, people are very safety conscious, especially if you go into factories, as I've done in recent days, and I have to wear the helmet or the hat.

It never looks very good with your ears sticking right out the side, but nevertheless, you have to keep it on. And some magnificent glasses as well, which are not exactly a fashion statement. Why? Because of the importance of care being taken.

That care has to be taken in the use of the teacher's tool, mainly the tongue. Because teachers can think that because we've taught something, we've lived it. That we can think that our imagination is akin to our experience.

C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* addresses this when he says concerning this very matter, those like myself whose imagination far exceeds their obedience are subject to a just penalty. We easily imagine conditions far higher than we have reached. If we describe what we have imagined, we may make others and make ourselves believe that we have really been there and so fool both them and ourselves.

There is a distinct vulnerability in exercising the role of a teacher because of the exposure that attaches to it, because of the responsibility that is clearly inherent in it, and because of the accountability that is directly related to it. That's why James is so clear. That's why it is so alarming in one sense.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly, will be under the gaze of a more severe judgment. I wonder if you remember Jesus saying the very same thing in Mark chapter 12 when addressing the congregation that was around him, he pointed out the distinction between the externals and the internals in the lives of those who were the Pharisees. And he says in Mark chapter 12, watch out for the teachers of the law.

Why? Well, they like to walk around in flowing robes and to be greeted in marketplaces and to have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. But they devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.

It's actually the same phraseology as you have here in James 3.1. Those who teach will be judged more strictly. The judgment will be more severe. Well, if it is such a significant and serious issue, then how should it be approached? Let me give you three words.

The first word is hesitancy. The second word is penalty. And the third word is honesty.

I'll just address them with you as succinctly as I can. How then should such a grave responsibility be approached? The answer is with a measure of hesitancy. With a measure of hesitancy.

The Greek here doesn't include the notion of presumption. It doesn't actually have a word about presumption. The Greek here simply says, Let not many become teachers.

The verb is ginomai. Let not many become teachers. The NIV is trying to help us out by introducing the notion of presumption and conveying the danger that is inherent in that.

In other words, you could possibly say, Well, I'd love to be a teacher. I'd like to go up there and speak where he speaks. I'd like to have that position.

There seems to be prestige that is attached to it. Well, there is. But grave responsibility.

Matthew Henry commenting on this says, For him that is taught in the word, to give respect to him that teaches is commendable enough in him that gives it. All right? So, if we're being taught the Bible, it's commendable enough for us to pay respect to our teachers. But, says Matthew Henry, for him that teaches to love it and demand it is sinful and abominable.

And instead of teaching, he is need to learn the first lesson in the school of Christ, which is humility. Which is humility. Isaiah says, This is the one to whom I will look, says the Lord, he who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at my word.

That doesn't mean somebody who, when they have the responsibility to teach the Bible, stands up and says, Oh, I can't speak. I'm so nervous. I don't know what to do.

Oh, what a wonderful teacher. It's fantastic, isn't it? No, it's rubbish. It's hopeless.

He needs to go away. We may bring him back, but for now he should go away. The issue is, what is happening in the secret place and in the private place? What happens when a man is alone before his

Bible and alone before God? How does he view himself there? How does he ask and cry out to God there? It is what happens there in private that gives significance to what happens here in public.

That's the key. And that's the point that James is making. If all you want to do is stand up and have people listen to you talk, get a job as a town crier.

Go get a job as a television pundit. Do whatever it is. But whatever you do, do not assume, do not presume to become a teacher of the Bible because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Therefore, there should be a hesitancy attached to it. Paul, when he describes himself in Ephesians 3, does not introduce himself as the mighty apostle who studied under Gamaliel and who went to one of the best law schools in the country. He could easily do that.

He mentions it other places. No, what does he say in Ephesians 3? He says, To me, the least and last of all apostles, grace was given to preach the gospel. What am I doing doing this, says Paul? I hated Jesus.

I had no interest in this stuff. I condemned Christ and all who lived for Christ. But because grace was given me, I now preach, teach the gospel.

And God's word through Jeremiah, which is an ancient word. I haven't heard a sermon on this verse probably since I was a teenager. I used to hear a lot of them and I was reflecting on it this week.

But from Jeremiah 45, 5, which was a great preacher's verse. The word of God through Jeremiah to Baruch, B-A-R-U-C-H. He says to Baruch, Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

Seek them not. You can seek great things for God and for his glory and for his kingdom and for his people, but for yourself, no. Let another praise you.

Let another advance your cause. Let another be the initiative taker. Let another be the person who makes these plans and develops these opportunities.

Should you seek great things for yourself? No, seek them not. It's completely antithetical, isn't it? Completely counterintuitive. Hesitancy, second word, penalty.

Why be so hesitant? Well, look what happens. You get judged more strictly. Those who teach understand that they undergo a closer scrutiny.

Of course they do. Not only from men, but also from God. The responsibility brings an accountability.

Classically, in the Old Testament, you have God raising up Ezekiel. He gives him the scroll to eat and he says, you eat the scroll, and when you eat the scroll, then you go and speak. He tells him, I'm not going to send you in a cross-cultural situation.

I'm going to send you to your own people. You'll understand their language. They will understand your language.

They're spiritually deaf. They're defiant. You'll need to have a flinty forehead.

It's going to be lonely. It's going to be uncomfortable. It's going to be unsuccessful.

You'll need to have physical courage. You'll need to have integrity. You'll need to have a sustained commitment.

Otherwise, you'll chuck it and go home very early on. You've got to understand why the average teaching role in a church in North America is so incredibly short. Because it is so incredibly difficult.

And not least of all, because of the people one has a responsibility of teaching to. So, here's the deal, Ezekiel. I want you to go and do this.

And I want you to understand something. I have made you a watchman over the house of Israel. So, hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

When I say to a wicked man, you will surely die, and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that man will die for his sin, and I will hold you, Ezekiel, accountable for his blood. And when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin.

But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin, and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself. It's a two-edged sword teaching, isn't it? That's why the people come in, and when I was a boy, they used to come in and sit at the back of the classroom. Who is the person that comes in? Who is this lady or gentleman that comes in and sits at the back of the classroom with a big notebook? This is the area supervisor, the area whatever you call him or her.

And suddenly the teacher got all very good at teaching, and will he? No, come along class, we're all doing lovely today, aren't we? Oh, snippety-do. No, what's going on here? I figure it's got something to do with him, with the clipboard. Of course it does, because she's getting marks for punctuality, for joviality, for clarity, for all these things, and the guy at the back makes all the difference to the lady at the front.

Why? Accountability. The person who teaches others the meaning of the Bible will not only be judged as to the content of his teaching, but as to the conduct of his life. And not only as to the conduct of his life, but as to what motivated the teaching in every instance.

Notice how James includes himself in this. It's masterful and it is right. Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

He's a teacher and he's included in the group. Notice that it is what they know about what will happen then that enables them to deal with the now. You know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Therefore, it's not a good idea to jump up and volunteer for this. Hesitancy, penalty, and finally just a word or two about honesty. The honesty that is here in verse 2. 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. What is James saying? He's saying that we all make mistakes in a variety of ways, but none more easily so than in our words. Let's be honest, says James, it's a problem for everyone.

Anyone who speaks knows that you can make such a mess of things without even trying very hard. And it is as we gain control of our tongues that we will then begin to get mastery over our bodies. That's the significance of the imagery he's about to use in verse 3 and following.

A bit in the mouth of the horse, a rudder that is giving direction to the ship. We all stumble in many ways. Well, let's just be honest about this.

Let's just finish with a word to those of us who teach. To those of us who teach. The task of the teacher of the Bible is to open up what's closed, to make plain what is obscure, to unravel what is knotted, and to unfold what is tightly packed.

Therefore, it is a bad Sunday when the reverse happens. When those entrusted with the responsibility of such clarity close what is open, obscure what is plain, tie up what is unraveled, and tightly pack what has previously been unfolded. If I may just be honest with you, the hardest Sundays and the toughest Sundays are the Sundays when the teacher himself knows that he didn't do his best.

Oh, people may come and say this was terrific or that was helpful or whatever else it is, but the teacher knows I didn't do this properly. I know I didn't do it properly, no matter what anyone thinks. But God knows.

It takes honesty. We've got to be honest with ourselves. For example, last Monday, and it just so happens I didn't set this up, I didn't do this last Monday so that I could say this this Sunday.

But last Monday in my journal, which was I think the 6th of August, as I rehearsed a number of things, I said, I wrote, yesterday was a full Sunday. I tried to deal with James 2, 20 to 26, and in the evening gave further clarification on justification. I fear I tipped my wheelbarrow on the dear people.

I fear I tipped my wheelbarrow on the dear people. In other words, I didn't get it. Now whether I did or I didn't, that's how I felt.

And I'm always wary when my colleagues walk away from the responsibility of teaching, assuming that this was fantastic. Or when they walk into the task of teaching with a kind of back-slapping camaraderie of the locker room, which is like, let's go get them. It's way too serious for that.

It's a matter of life and death. It is the surgeon with his scalpel and one wrong move matters tremendously. It is the anesthetist with all that chemistry.

It is all of that and more because it is the care of the souls of people for all of eternity. And he who teaches will be judged more severely. It is impossible to read the New Testament without recognizing that there is some correlation between degrees of judgment and the conferring of gifts and the nature of the responsibility, and rightly so.

That's what makes it so phenomenally alarming. And that's why I love the honesty of a guy like Luther, who in his introduction to the Psalms is saying, these Psalms are really hard to understand and preach. And he says, some of us get one part right, other teachers get other parts right, none of us get it all right.

And this is Luther. One falls in one thing, one in another. Others will see what I do not.

What then follows but that we should help one another and make allowances for those who err as knowing that we either have erred or shall err ourselves. And then, what a dig is in this. I know that he must be a man of most shameful hardyhood, who would venture to give out that he understands a single book of Scripture in all its parts.

Nay, who would venture to assume that one Psalm has ever been perfectly understood by anyone. Our life is a beginning and a setting out, not a finishing. He is best who shall have apprehended nearest to the

mind of the Spirit.

That's the kind of pastor you need. Not a talking head who has the answer to every question. But someone who comes before the Bible and says, this is my best with this.

But now we see through a glass darkly. And that is not about embracing theological vagueness. It's about recognizing what is actually true.

And yet, contemporary evangelicalism exalts as heroes these individuals of shameful hardyhood, according to Martin Luther. Well, finally, if there is a challenge that is attendant upon those who are the teachers, what shall we say for those of us who are listeners? How should we listen? Well, we need to listen to those who teach us, recognizing that they teach as men who must give an account. Hebrews 13.

They keep watch over your souls as men who must give an account. And therefore, when you think about that, as you listen to whoever is teaching you the Bible, you say, well, I want to encourage this fellow by being a good learner. I want to keep in mind that they will be judged more strictly.

So I want to try and make their job a little more encouraging, perhaps a little more enjoyable, perhaps a little easier. I don't know whether you have the pastor for lunch in your house, whether you have the sermon for supper. I don't know what you do with it five minutes after the benediction to tell you the truth.

But I do know this, that as I labor in the Word and in doctrine, I'm not half as concerned about that as I am concerned about the fact that as a teacher, I will be judged more strictly for every word that has come out of my mouth. Words that not only fly around this room, but words that fly around the nation and on the internet fly around the world. By two o'clock this afternoon, the whole world via the web has access to every word I've just spoken to you.

What an immense privilege. What a keep you awake at night responsibility. And when you read Christian biography, you say, I am horrible.

I am the chief of sinners. I'm looking in vain for somebody to give me a modicum of encouragement and this week I found it. And with this I will conclude.

Alexander White of recent Georges in Edinburgh. If he was still alive, I'd go find him and give him a big kiss. Because of his honesty.

Listen to what he says. Writing of himself. He's one of the most esteemed and favoured preachers of the gospel in a hundred years of Scottish history.

People flocked to listen to him preach at recent Georges. It was standing room only. People sat on the windowsills and everything.

Alexander White, what a man, you see. This is what he writes. No man living has more woe than I have at myself because of my unadvised and offending words.

And however often I keep silent and however much I prepare myself before I speak, my feet will sometimes go so far from under me that I suffer some sore falls and I'm an offence to my best and most patient friend. I know you're not supposed to jump up and go hallelujah after you read something like that. But it was a great encouragement.

At least I found an honest pastor somewhere. Thanks, Alexander. I had a sneaking suspicion that might be the case.

Let not many of you become teachers. For he who teaches will be judged with greater strictness. We all stumble in many ways.

Let's be honest. Father, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for the privilege of studying it together.

Thank you for those who have been our teachers down through the years for the clarity of their instruction and the quality of their lives. Help us then to emulate them, to follow their example, and best of all to bow down our knees before Jesus, the great and best teacher of all who promises to come by the Holy Spirit and enable the least likely of us to be useful in seeking to see unbelieving people become the committed followers of Jesus Christ. May grace and mercy and peace from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with each one now and forevermore.

Amen. For additional information about how you can support Truth For Life, please visit us online at [truthforlife.org](http://truthforlife.org). There you will also find additional free message downloads from Alistair Begg and other resources to help you grow in your Christian faith. Again, the website is [truthforlife.org](http://truthforlife.org). Truth For Life, where the learning is for living.

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