



Make the Most of This Opportunity

Do You Like Having Power?

Have you ever noticed some people just want to be in charge? Others would rather be told what to do...perhaps not many though. And then there are the ones who lay back behind the scenes and tell those "making the decisions" what to do. Power, or the lack thereof has a fascinating effect on us. There was a guy early in my ministry who used to respectfully call me pastor out in public but when we met privately called me Greg and made it clear he was my boss. I was no more his pastor than I was the Apostle Paul. Being in charge can make us grumpy, opinionated, critical, and self-centered. Others are humbled by the experience. The brother of Jesus, James says we should be careful if we ever find ourselves in charge of others.

James writes in James 3: 1-2, **My brothers, not many of you become teachers because you know full well we teachers receive a stronger judgement. For we all continually stumble in many ways. If a certain one by his word never stumbles, that man is fully developed. He is able to control even the whole body.** There isn't agreement among translators as to how to render the term translated "teachers" in the NIV. John Calvin as well as the KJV translated the Greek word, "didaskolos" as "master" and in a sense there is something to seeing what James has to say that way. Most translators would agree though that it should be rendered teachers because its root has to do with teaching, providing understanding. I realize that many may quickly consider this passage irrelevant, and you may be in that group because you aren't a teacher, particularly not one who teaches the Bible but when we finish, if you still don't see how this command of James applies to your situation, then perhaps you can take a break this week from thinking about what is explained. I think though you will soon see how James has something for you to consider just like every part of the Bible is helpful in some way to your life.

James has a great concern here. He was not upset with anyone just being a teacher...providing lessons to help students mature and develop. James is warning against the abuse of power teaching can take, becoming the authority over others. Let's consider a few examples to get the gist of this. Remember when David's brother Eliab got angry with David for investigating the rewards offered for killing the giant Goliath? **When Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, "Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle."** (1 Samuel 17: 28 NIV) You have known people like that. They quash people's dreams because of personal insecurity, bad experiences they have suffered or an inability to see what could be. The same might be said of Naomi, the mother-in law of Ruth. Both were widows and were ready for a fresh start. Naomi decided to return to her hometown of Bethlehem and Ruth wanted to go with her. Naomi tried to discourage her, and it was later she discovered what a huge mistake that would have been. **"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."** (Ruth 1: 15 NIV) We have all been in Naomi's shoes, not wanting someone disappointed by chasing aspirations we thought too lofty for them. Who can forget the Apostle Peter rebuking Jesus for insisting He was going to be executed soon? Jesus' response was swift and withering. **Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** (Matthew 16: 23 NIV)

Here is the trap God insists we avoid. We can think we know more than others and try to influence what they do and think. However, we may be completely off base in our assumptions and unaware of how wrong we are. As James reminds us, “**we all continually stumble in many ways**”. Not only are we sinners who rebel against God, our sinning warps how we see things and makes us think more of ourselves than we should. Remember Paul’s warning. **For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.** (Romans 12: 3 NIV) The alarm James raises is that in our rush to teach others or judge others or correct others, we have a history of going the wrong way ourselves and not realizing it. Who are we to teach when we can’t get it right ourselves? To paraphrase Jesus, we are generally more often than we want to admit “the blind leading the blind”. I remember giving directions to someone and after she drove away realizing I sent her the wrong way.

James is not saying there should not be teachers nor is he implying you have nothing to offer others. You are in this world to make those God puts in your life better, happier, with more faith in God and a desire for excellence. Where we fail is when we want authority over others, preeminence. It is Christ who is Lord of all, no one else rules our lives. Jesus made the seemingly inane demand that we are to call no one “father”, let alone “teacher”. **And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ.** (Matthew 23: 9-10 NIV) There has been plenty of fluster about this command of Christ, but it really is quite simple. Never forget who is in charge, who is the one who knows the way for you and everyone else. It is God the Father; it is Christ the Son. Where we fail others is when we think we have a right to take God’s place. It is a subtle matter, and it is not easy to see we have done this. God’s warning is quite severe. God judges more strongly those who are teachers, people who take places of authority in the lives of others.

Here are five warning signs we have crossed the line with others. 1. We give advice too casually. Rather than carefully being certain we are aligned with God and the Bible; we speak on our own. 2. We speak authoritatively about matters where God is in charge. 3. We speak for God. Jesus warned against false prophets in the last days. How many have heard of someone who said rather proudly, “I have a word from the Lord for you”. 4. We weaponize our words. We use them to accuse, to judge, to threaten or to mock. The Bible is quite clear about making sure the words you use build up others rather than tear them down. 5. We say something that discredits or undermines the Word of God and His power to build lives. Pessimism that gives no credence to faith in Christ is a kissing cousin to what many call “realism”.

Here are four rules to follow when you have been given a place of authority either by your responsibility as a teacher or leader. 1. When making decisions that impact others or about to impart advice, pause and pray. Fifteen seconds could make all the difference in your life or that of others. 2. Access Authority. Soak your thoughts in the Bible, letting it correct your thinking, your ideas, and your insight. 3. Settle on Service. Make sure your top priority, whether it is in teaching or leading is not about you, but the welfare of those God has given you. Jesus tells us to put others first just like He did us! **Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.** (Matthew 20:26-28 NIV) 4. Home in on Humility. Never lose sight of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and telling us to do the same with others. How many teachers and leaders fail because they take themselves too seriously. I have a friend who often notes that God used a jackass to speak for Him to Balaam. Many of us may not be that much further along than Balaam’s donkey. Just because God chooses to use us for matters that are of great importance does not mean we are special; it simply indicates how big and marvelous He is. If God gives you the privilege to guide or lead others, don’t shy away from the opportunity. Make the most of it. You do that by making Christ King over your life with reckless abandon and dedication. Remember, “You are not your own.” You belong to God and in great loving kindness He may choose to use you to make the world a better place.