

Lesson plans: James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Why does James begin by addressing teachers?

by [Mary Hinkle Shore](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

With fall education programs getting under way and Sunday school teachers beginning another year of teaching, it may be disconcerting to hear this reading from James: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

In this chapter James is warning his listeners that it is difficult to guard the tongue. But the link between the first verse and the rest of the chapter is not self-evident. Why begin this section by addressing teachers? Is self-control with respect to words harder for teachers than others? (No fair answering if you are in academic administration.) Or is it just that teachers, like preachers, make their living with words, and so the likelihood of error is greater for them? With access to so much rope, it is only a matter of time before we professional speakers hang ourselves.

Yet I wonder if both of these answers aren't beside the point that James is making. In the first two chapters of the letter, James points out instances of hypocrisy. When we say we have faith but do not care for the widow and orphan, what kind of faith are we confessing? Who exactly are we saying we believe in? Surely not the God of Abraham, Rahab and Jesus (James 2:23-26). It is hypocrisy when our speech and actions are not in sync. When we show favoritism to the rich and send the poor away empty, we are falsifying any statement of faith we make in the God of our Lord Jesus.

It is also hypocrisy when speech and speech are not in sync, and this is the problem James addresses. If we bless the Creator God and then curse someone created in the image of God, we not only say something unfavorable about another human being. We also say something untrue about God—namely, that God makes junk. We are professing a theology of creation opposed to the testimony that “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” One element of our speech gives the lie to the other, and in the end we are not just lying; we are lying

about God. Hence the strict judgment. The warning James gives is especially for those who—by virtue of praying, praising, preaching or just talking about God—are teachers of divine things.

Maybe this is why Jesus becomes so angry with Peter. When Peter rejects Jesus' teaching that the Messiah must be crucified, Peter is beginning to fashion a lie about God. Surely, Peter is suggesting, there must be an easier way.

I would very much like for Peter to be right, for I have never understood why God needed the bloody sacrifice of an innocent victim in order to forgive sin. Why couldn't Jesus have just kept on healing people and telling parables and blessing children until, at an advanced age, he died in his sleep? Or aged gracefully as a teacher, spending summers at the lake, sporting a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, and greeting class after class of ever younger, fresh-faced disciples every fall? "Consider the lilies of the field . . .," he would say, and pens would start scribbling across the pages of notebooks.

"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). Peter doesn't agree. Surely there is an easier way!

But although Peter's teaching career starts out innocently enough (according to Matthew, Peter says, "This must not happen to you!"), look where it leads. Before long, Peter is face to face with the prospect of his own great suffering, which he averts only by his passionate testimony, "I do not know the man!" There *is* an easier way and Peter finds it, but only by lying about his association with the one he has known and confessed to be God's anointed.

Perhaps, then, Jesus "must suffer" because he will not lie about whether and how he knows God. The Son of Man must suffer because he will reject every compromise with the authorities, the crowds, the Romans and even with his own beloved Peter. Although it is true that "with God all things are possible," it is hard to speak truth to power and then spend summers at the lake. Jesus will speak truth to power, and power will squash him like a gnat.

I was recently part of a small focus group that offered feedback on a newly designed Web site for the seminary where I teach. We talked for a while about the colors, the graphics, the menus and submenus, and then one of the group members said,

“Nowhere on these pages is there a cross.” She was right. I was surprised, but even more stunned and chastened by the realization that I had not even noticed its absence. I wondered where else we were not clearly saying, “Look, you need to know this man died. He was tortured and executed. It was awful.”

Where else—as congregations, as schools, as teachers—are we not saying this? As we manage to tell the story of Jesus without the cross, we have learned what Peter was teaching as he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. As we follow Peter’s teaching and repeat it, Jesus may find a way to say to us, as he said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” This is the strictness with which teachers will be judged.