

# The Ultimate Head Game...

January 10, 2007

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that if you would attend these ten weeks of studies in the book of James that your life would improve. I stand by that with this condition; you will have to become very intentional about changing some of your personal habits, many of them that you've had for a long, long time, and adapting to some new ways that we're going to learn about how to live a healthy and wholesome life.

We're starting off with a bang. There's a lot to be said for the know-it-all, and it's all bad. You know how it goes, *people who think they know it all are very annoying to those of us that really do*. I don't know anyone that likes being around someone that always has to have the last word, who always feels their ideas or position on politics, faith, theology, family, work, money, education, vacation, recreation, sports, clothes, cars, pets—you get the picture—are better than, superior to, more informed than, and more deserving of attention than anyone else's.

But it's a tricky thing to avoid, because we want to know, need to know, and should know a lot about a lot of things. Very often, for all of the wrong reasons, reasons like pride and personal insecurity, we are tempted to use what we know, what we think we know, or what we can convince others that we know, not to help them, not to help the situation, not to solve a problem, not to accomplish a task, but to feed our need to be in control.

It can make people, most poignantly us, think we're different, better, wiser, smarter...than the average person. It's The Ultimate Head Game. James is going to tell us it's not a game we need to win. In fact, it's not a game we should even play. There's tremendous freedom and liberty in making peace with the fact that you don't know it all, and that you don't have the answer for every question, and that you should be extremely careful before you ever start offering advice to other people about anything of substance.

Anyone that wants to can declare themselves a teacher or a preacher, and if they have a regular group they speak to, a pastor, a spokesman for God, a divine oracle, or as one fellow claimed recently in a letter he sent me, God's anointed prophet for the greater Fort Smith area. A lot of those people make some high sounding claims by the things they say. They're hardly ever right. Seriously. Saying it is one thing, being right is another. And, as we'll see, being right is part of the requirement any time a person speaks in the name of God.

The first twelve verses of chapter three are going to provide us with enough information about the things that come out of our mouths that those of us who chose to take it to heart will be taking huge leaps to improve the quality of life we enjoy now, and the quality of life we'll enjoy in heaven.

I've wished for years there was a way to hold people accountable for the things they say when they dare to speak for God. I don't do that, by the way. I don't speak for God, and have never claimed to. I endeavor to do a thorough, fair, scholarly, and balanced job of investigating the teachings of the Bible and then offer what I hope is a

fair and balanced interpretation of those teachings for the consideration of my congregation, but I don't speak for God. I wouldn't dare. And I don't think you should either. If you do, I think you should have to stand behind your words...

- I think if a person tells you God will do a certain thing, and he doesn't do it, then that person should be held liable for all related damages—as well as have to admit his/her ignorance in a court of law and agree never to claim to speak for God to anyone ever again—which the Old Testament makes provision for, but we'll talk about it in a few minutes.
- If someone sells millions of books explaining how to get God to make you prosperous, and you don't prosper, then I think the person who wrote the book should have to refund everyone's money...with interest—and admit they didn't know what they were talking about in the first place and were just out to make a buck, which is okay unless you're praying on the vulnerability of hurting and needy people in the name of a loving and caring God to do so.
- If someone figures out everything there is to know about the second coming and they start selling tapes, CDs and books, when time proves them wrong, which it always has, always does, and always will, then they should have to repay every cent they made—and apologize to the whole world for making the genuine work of Christian ministry a thousand times harder than it should be by stealing our credibility and selling it for a bag of silver.
- I wish we could institute the Old Testament standard again...

### **Deuteronomy 18:20-22**

A prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.

<sup>21</sup>You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" <sup>22</sup>If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken.

The lack of earnest scholarship and the intellectual dishonesty of those who seem so ready to speak *ex-cathedra* is embarrassing to me as a person who makes his living in the field of vocational ministry.

But there's a lot more to be concerned about than embarrassment when a person takes on the mantle of pastor/teacher/leader among God's people.

## **I. The First Lesson About Teaching—Look Before You Leap.**

### **James 3:1**

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Some of us are going to be teachers. Someone needs to do it, so someone has to do it...it's that simple. James says, "not many"—he doesn't say "not any."

A word to the wise—don't jump too fast. Look before you leap. Being a teacher of theology or biblical content is the sort of responsibility that you don't want unless you know it's what you really want/need to do, are willing to prepare to do well, and until you're ready to face the consequences for not doing well.

- Moffett's translation says: "Don't crowd in to be teachers..."
- Williams' says: "Many of you...should avoid becoming teachers..."

### **ILLUSTRATION**

I became a follower of Christ when I was in high-school, and I got heavily involved in the life of my church. Everybody and their cat was telling me I needed to pursue a life of vocational ministry, although they didn't use those words—because neither of us would have known what they were talking about. They just kept advising me that I should "surrender to the ministry." So I finally did, although I never really thought of pastoral ministry as an enemy that I needed to surrender to... If I had only known...

I've never done that to anyone else...ever. And I never will. I think a person should do this kind of work for one reason and one reason only—he/she sees it as the perfectly normal and natural reaction or response to their relationship with God. But a lot of people get in this work for other reasons.

### **ILLUSTRATION**

One of my earliest memories of college life was this statement made by my professor of Pastoral Ministries, Dr. Dan Holcomb, "If you can be happy and satisfied doing anything else, you probably ought to do it. God called one man and a thousand fools answered. Most of you will never pastor a church...and that is as it should be. The sooner you figure that out the better it will be for everyone."

If there's anything that stinks worse than climbing the social ladder, it's climbing the ecclesiastical one...

### **Matthew 23:1-10**

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: <sup>2</sup>"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. <sup>3</sup>So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

<sup>4</sup>They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

<sup>5</sup>"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; <sup>6</sup>they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; <sup>7</sup>they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

<sup>8</sup>“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup>And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup>Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ.”

- Explaining this is a thorny thing to attempt, but it isn’t actually a prohibition against using these three words, or others that are similar to them, to describe what a person does...it’s the use of any term for the sake of granting artificial piety or supposed spiritual stature or enlightened existence that’s prohibited.
- Never the less, I still prefer to err on the side of caution and have asked for years that when people talk to or about me, if they do at all, that they simply call me Ed.

### 3 John 9

Diotrephes...loves to be first. <sup>10</sup> ...if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing.

There are two problems that are guaranteed to surface when someone assumes the role of teacher too quickly, unadvisedly or with inadequate preparation or education.

1. **Somebody will believe you really know what you’re talking about...**
  - a. When you teach the Bible in the name of God someone just might believe you know what you’re talking about.
  - b. Someone is going to believe what you’re teaching them.
  - c. And some of them are going to do what you’ve told them to do...
  - d. And God holds you accountable for it...we’ll get to that in a minute.
2. **You will believe that you really know what you’re talking about...**
  - a. The worst deception, though, is when you start believe you know it all; when you start to over-estimate your own worth to the kingdom; when you begin to believe that your words carry more weight than the words of others.
  - b. Highly respected people often wear a self-awarded halo of infallibility, and it’s an extremely heady game to play.
    - i. The more you decry your holiness the more they exalt your greatness.
    - ii. The more humble you are, the more godly you appear.
    - iii. The less you appear to want, the more they want you to have.

### **QUOTE**

I can’t remember how long ago I wrote this, but it was early in my work as a pastor...

“To find oneself in vocational ministry for the wrong reason is a gilded misery, a secret poison, a hidden plague, the engineer of deceit, the mother of hypocrisy, the parent of envy, the original vice, the moth of holiness, and the blinder of

minds that turns men into monsters, churches into prisons and people into pawns.”

**Jeremiah 45:5**

Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

**IT REALLY IS THE ULTIMATE HEAD GAME.**

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What is your initial reaction to the biblical advice that not many should be teachers?
2. How does this warning change the way you think about the women and men that you know that are pastors and/or teachers?
3. How does this discussion cause you to think or feel differently about your own role or involvement as a follower of Christ?

**II. The Responsibility Of Leadership—Accountability Is Unbelievably High.**

I’m on record for saying that I’d trade jobs with almost anyone I know...and I stand by it. I really would if I could make the decision unilaterally without grieving the Spirit...and it’s not because I don’t enjoy my work.

- On one hand, I believe I’m doing what I have the temperament and talent to do.
  - When you get into the “gifting” and “calling” terms I tend to get a little confused, because that’s always seemed a little too fluid for me to define with any degree of certainty, but maybe that’s there too...I hope so.
- On the other hand, that doesn’t mean I couldn’t do something else well.
  - I think I could, and let me show you why I would do so if I could do so with a clear conscience...

**Hebrews 13:17**

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.

- I am going to have to face judgment for my work as a pastor, both for my personal motives as well as the leadership I’ve dared to ask others to follow.
- And, don’t take this wrong please, but I’d really rather not have to be held answerable for what other people do in response to how I do my work...so, I’d trade jobs with just about anyone I know to avoid that...
- Now let me show you why I won’t do anything else, or at least why I’ve never felt the freedom to do anything else...

## **Luke 12:48b**

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

## **1 Timothy 4:13-16**

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. <sup>14</sup>Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

<sup>15</sup>Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. <sup>16</sup>Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

## **1 Timothy 3:1-7**

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup>Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup>not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup>He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. <sup>5</sup>(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) <sup>6</sup>He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. <sup>7</sup>He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

I know these words were written by Paul to Timothy and that they carry a specific message to him that they don't carry to anyone else, particularly the words in chapter 4.

- In one sense these words don't describe my experience at all.
  - No one gave me any kind of "gift through a prophetic message."
  - And although at my ordination service the men laid their hands on my head and prayed for me, it was, although meaningful and kind, merely a show of support and love for me, and nothing more than that.
- But I also believe there is an applicable principle that every one of us should be aware of.
  - Some of us are supposed to do this work, and we should do it to the best of our ability until we are released from it.
  - And the more we have to work with, the more God expects us to do.
- This is what I'd like you men to know...
  - I'm willing to face judgment for the things I teach, for the things I ask you to consider, for the advice I give, and for every lesson I teach.
  - And although I'd rather not, my fear of judgment from being disobedient if I do anything else is greater than my fear of making a mistake as a teacher, pastor and leader.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How would you apply Luke 12:48 to your own life and experience?
2. Do you believe a final accounting before God awaits all of us?
3. Have you ever determined what you believe about your personal level of judgment and accountability as a follower of Christ?
4. What effect does it have on you?

### **III. Conclusion**

Paul's own words explain my conundrum well enough.

#### **1 Corinthians 9:16**

When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!