

James 3:1-12

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Verse 1: “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.” This verse is warning those who are teachers (masters) to take this responsibility very seriously, for teachers will receive a greater condemnation. That is, those teachers who do NOT take their responsibility seriously and teach false doctrine will be punished severely. When I was in preaching school, we had to sign a form saying that we understood the meaning of this verse, realizing how critical our job is to preach the Truth.

Verse 2: “For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.” In using the term “we,” James includes himself in saying that we as humans are imperfect. We all offend “in many things,” and the current discussion is how we offend in our speech. James states that those who do not offend in word are “perfect” and “able also to bridle the whole body.” In other words, James is saying that it takes a very spiritually mature (perfect, or COMPLETE) Christian to be able to control the tongue. Controlling the tongue is very difficult, and James seemingly admitted here that even he had difficulty controlling his tongue.

Verses 3-4: “Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.” James gives two examples here of very small things that work for the purpose of control.

A bit is a metal piece that is placed in a horse’s mouth, connected to the reins and a bridle, for the purpose of controlling the horse. Introduce a slight amount of unwanted pressure into a horse’s mouth, and you can control his whole body.

A helm is the steering wheel of a ship. It is connected to the rudder, and, when turned, allows the ship to go where it needs to go. In comparison to the size of the entire ship, the helm and the rudder are very small, but they play a crucial role in controlling the entire ship.

Verse 5: “Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!” Similarly to the bit and the helm, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it is a very important part. Even though the tongue is small, it “boasteth great things” in that it is capable of great good or great harm. Many people use their tongues for great harm, belittling, making fun of, and disparaging others. In this sense, the tongue is a “fire” capable of inflicting great damage.

Verse 6: “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.” The greatest of wildfires often start out from a tiny spark, a cigarette carelessly tossed

from a vehicle, or an unattended campfire. What may start out as a controlled burn can quickly progress to a state of being out of control, destroying thousands of acres.

The tongue, if managed carelessly, can inflict great damage. The damage may appear small at first, but then it grows and grows until it causes terrible affliction. For example, how many children have been tormented week after week by relentless school-yard bullies, who use their tongues to tear down their victims? Sadly, this is a growing problem that young people are facing every day.

Verses 7-8: “For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” Going back to verse 2 where James said “in many things we offend all,” I think James is saying here that even though man has been able to tame all sorts of animals throughout history, something as seemingly simple as the human tongue is near impossible to tame. Even though some of us are certainly better than others at controlling our tongues, we still tend to have great difficulty with this, and from time to time even the most self-controlled among us tend to slip up and inflict “deadly poison” on others with our tongues.

Verses 9-10: “Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.” One cannot rightly worship God and, in the next instant, curse men with his tongue. God cares greatly for His creation, and He takes it personally when people use their tongue to disparage others! Blessing and cursing cannot rightly proceed out of our mouths. If they are, then our religion is amiss and we had better repent!

Verses 11-12: “Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.” James concludes this section about the tongue by giving several oxymoronic examples.

A fountain does not produce both sweet and bitter water from the same fount. You may find sweet water here, and bitter water there, but you will never find sweet and bitter water coming from the same place!

A fig tree does not bear olives. Fig trees bear figs, and olive trees bear olives! This is obvious scientific fact, sometimes called “the seed principle,” (the fact that every manner of plant reproduces after its KIND; see Gen. 1:11-12).

Finally, a fountain cannot yield at the same time both saltwater and freshwater. This is simply impossible because of the laws of nature. Just as these things are true, so it must be true that we as Christians should not use our mouths for both blessing and cursing.