

## **I. The Challenge of Taming the Tongue (vs. 1-12)**

- A. The Paramount Importance of Taming the Tongue (vs. 1-2).
1. Controlling the tongue is a special part of wisdom, an important theme in James.
    - a) We saw this before as we surveyed James – the wise man controls his tongue.
    - b) Also, this section on speech is followed by a section on wisdom – this parallels chapter 1 where a section on wisdom (1:5-8) is paired with a section on speech (1:19-26).
    - c) See particularly 1:19 and 1:26 for earlier calls to control one’s tongue.
    - d) Even the emphasis in ch. 2 on saying you have faith (v. 14) and on simply saying “be warmed and filled” (v. 16) is a backdrop to this chapter’s emphasis on careful speech.
  2. A warning for teachers (v. 1).
    - a) Greater Judgment
    - b) Due to greater potential to slip up with the tongue.
      - (1) Teaching involves words, especially so in James’ day (oral culture)
      - (2) Easy to misstep, or to use words to badger, belittle or bully others.
      - (3) Public speech “*provides temptations to virtually every form of evil speech: arrogance and domination over students; anger and pettiness at contradiction or inattention; slander and meanness toward absent opponents; flattery of students for the sake of vainglory.*” (REC)
      - (4) However, an official teaching office may not be in view – not necessarily excluding women from this warning.
  3. The universal weakness – taming the tongue (v. 2a).
  4. The significance of taming the tongue (v. 2b).
    - a) The tongue can influence others for good
    - b) If one could tame the tongue, he would have true religion – he’d be perfect. (cf. 1:26)
    - c) One who doesn’t tame the tongue tends not to be able to tame his other bodily passions.
    - d) No one can tame the tongue however (cf. v. 6).
  5. Other Bible passages on the significance of the tongue: Is. 6:5, Ps. 34:12-13, Rom. 1:29-30, 3:10-14, Prov. 18:6-7.
- B. The Potential of the Tongue for Good (vs. 2b-5a).
1. Again, if you can tame the tongue, you master your soul (v. 2b).
  2. Two illustrations of the tongue’s potential for good.
    - a) Like a bit and bridle to a horse (v. 3). [modern example: steering wheel to a car]
    - b) Like a rudder to a ship (v. 4). [example is the sinking of the Bismarck]
    - c) So, even though the tongue is small, insignificant and overlooked, it has tremendous influence on the body (v. 5b).
  3. Other Bible passages on the power of the tongue for good: Prov. 10:11, 15:1a, 15:22, 15:31, 16:24.
- C. The Potential of the Tongue for Evil (vs. 5b-8).
1. The tongue is like a spark that can set the countryside ablaze (v. 5b).
    - a) It is small.
    - b) It is a catalyst of great evil
    - c) It can “consume” with astonishing speed.
      - (1) Fire was greatly feared in antiquity (not much ability to put it out)
      - (2) Word for “forest” – “*hylon* is derived from *hyle* which means a conflagration” (NIVAC),

and ASV has *“how much wood is kindled by how small a fire!”* (KJV has “great matter”)

(3) This could be referring to cities/buildings made of wood being burned up not just a forest fire (which first comes to our mind from our modern perspective).

(4) One small spark can cause a great fire, similarly *“one careless statement can ruin careers and destroy lives.”* (ZECNT)

- d) We know that gossip and insults can harm others easily, but even more specific to James’ point is revealed in v. 6, *“what is especially on James’s mind is not the reaction of others to your speech but the spreading of sin from your speech to the rest of your life...”* (ZECNT)
- 2. The tongue has great potential for evil – “a world of unrighteousness” (v. 6).
- 3. The tongue can infect the whole body (whole person).
  - a) *“Throughout the changing circumstances of life, the tongue continues to create evils. When young, we whine; when old, we criticize. When we fail, we excuse ourselves and blame others. When we succeed or our children succeed, we foul it by boasting.”* – (REC)
- 4. The tongue’s evil nature ultimately comes from its affinity with the powers of hell.
- 5. The tongue is influenced by Hell, but the emphasis may not be so much on the origin of evil speech but its punishment.
- 6. The tongue is like a beast that cannot be tamed (v. 7-8).
  - a) All kinds of animals have been tamed.
  - b) But humankind cannot tame the tongue.
  - c) Augustine: *“[James] does not say ‘no one can tame the tongue,’ but ‘no man,’ so that, when it is tamed, we admit that it was done by the mercy of God, the assistance of God, the grace of God.”*  
--Augustine, (REC)
- 7. The tongue is restless – it cannot wait to “strike”, like a viper and inject its poison (v. 8b).
- 8. Other Bible passages on the power of the tongue for evil: Prov. 15:1b, 15:2b, 15:4b, 16:27, 18:21, 20:19, 26:20-22.
- D. The Paradox of the Tongue [two ways to use the tongue] (vs. 9-12).
  - 1. The tongue can bless God and curse God’s children (v. 9).
    - a) Curse here could be literal (this may have been a problem in the church).
  - 2. Blessing and cursing from the same mouth (v. 10a).
  - 3. James’ warning: “these things ought not to be so.” (v. 10b)
  - 4. This paradox is not natural. (v. 11-12)
    - a) The example of a spring – either fresh or salty.
    - b) The example of olives and figs – one or the other. (cf. Matt. 7:16-20)
- E. The Proper Response to the Problem of the Tongue
  - 1. What should we do then? Should we try real hard to tame the tongue – it’s nearly impossible to tame but we can do it if we work hard. The benefits would be tremendous!
  - 2. Vs. 8 is intended to keep us from this thought, however. No one is really strong enough to control the tongue on their own.
  - 3. Consider Matt. 12:33-35 (& 37). The heart ultimately must be reined in by the work of the Spirit.
  - 4. James leaves us hanging, until 4:6, where we see the Gospel peek through more closely. We are not left to ourselves. If we humble ourselves, God will give us more grace – grace enough to be careful with our tongues.