

Taming the Tongue

James 3:1-12

SS Lesson for 08/23/2020

Devotional Scripture: Prov 18:2-13

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: James 3:5

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

CONTROL FOR TEACHERS (JAMES 3:1)

Consider the decision of being a teacher

Because there is only one true Teacher and that is Jesus (Matt 23:8)

Because as a teacher we should speak what we know and have seen from God (John 3:10-12)

Because to be a teacher, one must have first been taught himself (Rom 2:17-21)

Because God appoints true teachers (1 Cor 12:28)

Consider the accountability of being a teacher

Accountability to warn and tell others about God's requirements (Ezek 3:18-19)

Accountability of doing God's will when we know it (Luke 12:47-48)

Accountability of faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2)

Accountability of having to give account of those we teach (Heb 13:17)

Consider the judgment of being a teacher

Judgment of pride (Luke 20:45-47)

Judgment of not understanding what we say or teach (1 Tim 1:5-7)

Judgment of not teaching sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4)

Judgment of not maturing in the Word (Heb 5:12)

Judgment of being a false teacher (2 Peter 2:1)

Judgment of being a stumbling block (Matt 23:15)

CONTROL TONGUE'S POWER (JAMES 3:2-8)

Don't let the tongue make others stumble

Stumble into condemnation (Matt 12:37)

It is better to lose our tongue than to let it make others stumble (Matt 5:29)

Stumble by living according to the flesh (Rom 8:13)

Stumble by not disciplining our body and bringing it into subjection to God (1 Cor 9:27)

Power of the tongue

Power to be like a sword (Prov 12:18-19)

Power of life and death (Prov 18:21)

Power to take advantage (Jude 16)

Power to defile oneself (Matt 15:11)

Power of poison and deceit (Rom 3:13)

Taming the tongue

Tame by keeping our tongues from evil (Ps 34:13)

Tame by guarding our tongues and ways (Ps 39:1)

Tame by ensuring our tongues are guided by God (Prov 16:1)

Tame by guarding our mouth (Prov 21:23)

Tame by bridling our tongues (James 1:26)

CONTROL PURITY OF TONGUE (JAMES 3:9-12)

Control purity of tongue by rejecting sin

Sin affects tongues because sin makes the tongue cause one to be unclean (Matt 15:11)

Sin affects tongues because speaking rashly causes ruin (Prov 13:3)

Sin affects tongues because it keeps one from keeping control over their tongues (James 1:26)

Sin affects tongues if we allow our sinful natures to rule (Rom 3:12-14)

Control purity of tongue by committing to guard speech

Commit to seek God to guarding our lips (Ps 141:3)

Commit to guarding our mouths (Prov 21:23)

Commit to muzzling our speech (Ps 39:1)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

A Word of Warning to Would-Be Teachers (James 3:1-2)

Wishful Thinking: If the Tongue Could Only Be Tamed (James 3:2-4)

The Tongue Is Powerful, But Deadly, and Out of Control (James 3:5-8)

Worst of All, It Is Deceptive (James 3:9-12)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE ECHOES COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The longer we live, the more acutely we are aware of the power of the tongue to destroy. From the days when we hurled schoolyard taunts or insults (or were on the receiving end of those), we realized the power of words to hurt or damage. Every generation seems to learn this lesson the hard way. Consider, for example, the impact of social media in the world in general and in the church in particular. With fingers typing as an extension of the tongue, Christians argue sharply with each other about faith, politics, etc., in publicly visible Facebook threads. Prominent ministers and authors quarrel with one another on Twitter; relationships are strained or broken on ill-considered tweets of 280 characters or fewer. What would the Bible writers say about such practices?

Some practices of James's audience ran counter to what they voiced in speech. Up to the point of today's passage, James has written about negative modes of speech, such as the self-justifying claim that one is tempted by God (James 1:13), the flattering speech that reveals partiality toward the rich and shames the poor (2:3-6), the careless speech of those who wish the poor well but do not help them (2:16), and the superficial speech of the one claiming to have faith but lacking deeds (2:18). Other examples of improper speech occurring later include those of judging and slandering (James 4:11), boasting (4:13-16), and grumbling (5:9). Sandwiched in between is today's text. Since today's lesson draws heavily on figures of speech, some background information in that regard is in order. Figurative language adds interest and excitement to writing; chief among figures of speech are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. One easy example is the phrase "Joseph is a fruitful vine" (Genesis 49:22). This does not mean that this particular son of Jacob was literally a grapevine or other vegetation. It means, rather, that he was productive in some way. James's use of metaphor in speaking of the tongue reflects how other biblical writers use metaphor in speaking of the heart. Indeed, heart and tongue are used in poetic passages to stand parallel to one another.

Key Verse: James 3:5

Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

3:1. Again addressing **my brothers**, a sign that a new topic is being considered, James suggested moderation and restraint in the multiplication of **teachers**. Obviously too many of the new Jewish Christians aspired to teach and thereby carry some of the rank and admiration given to Rabbis. It is doubtful that the reference here is to official teachers of the apostolic or prophetic status. These are the unofficial teachers (*didaskaloi*) in the synagogue meetings of the church family where much latitude was given for even strangers to speak. Paul frequently used this courtesy given visitors. James' complaint was simply that too many believers were overly anxious to speak up and show off (cf. John 3:10; 9:40-41). Teaching has to be done, but those who teach must understand their responsibility, as those **who teach will be judged more strictly**. A teacher's condemnation is greater because, having professed to have a clear knowledge of duty, he is all the more bound to obey it.

3:2. James did not point a finger at the offenders without including himself: **We all stumble in many ways**. Nothing seems to trip a believer more than a dangling tongue. If a believer **is never at fault** (lit., "stumbles not") **in what he says** (lit., "in word"), **he is a perfect**, fulfilled, mature, complete person (*teleios anēr*). He is **able** to "bridle" **his whole body**. Spiritual maturity requires a tamed tongue.

3:3-5. The tongue may be small but it is influential. Three illustrations make this point clear: the bit and the horse, the rudder and the ship, and the spark and the forest. James' use of imagery drawn from natural phenomena is similar to the Lord's. It is likewise characteristic of Jewish thought. The Greek used in this

passage is both ancient and eloquent. James was both steeped in Jewish tradition and well-versed in Greek classics. The argument is clear. Just as little **bits... turn** grown **horses**, small rudders guide large **ships**, and **a small spark** consumes an entire **forest**, so **the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts**. The tongue is petite but powerful!

3:6. The tongue is not only powerful; it is also perverse. It is small and influential but, worse by far, it can be satanic and infectious. **The tongue... is a fire** (cf. Prov. 16:27; 26:18-22), **a world of evil**. The tongue sets itself up (*kathistatai*) among the members, or **parts** of one's anatomy, corrupting, spotting, or staining (*spilousa*; cf. *aspilon*, "spotless," in James 1:27) the whole **body** and inflaming **the whole course of... life** (lit., "the wheel of existence" or "wheel of birth," *ton trochon tēs geneseōs*). It is as though the tongue is at the center or hub of the wheel of nature and, like a fireworks display, the wheel is **set on fire** at the center. The more it burns, the faster it revolves until the whole wheel spins in a blaze, spitting fire in all directions. But the tongue is only the fuse; the source of the deadly fire is **hell** itself (lit., "Gehenna," a place in the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem where human sacrifice had been offered [Jer. 7:31] and where continuous burning of rubbish made it a fit illustration of the lake of fire).

3:7. The tongue is not only like an uncontrolled fire. It is also like an untamed beast. Every kind, or all nature (*physis*), of wild beasts—**birds** of the air, **reptiles** on land, and **creatures of the sea**—all **are being tamed and have been tamed by man** (lit., "human nature," *physis*; thus "bestly nature" is tamed by "human nature"). But no human is able to tame the tongue!

3:8. No one **can tame the tongue** because **it is a restless evil**, an unruly, unsteady, staggering, reeling evil (like the "unstable" man of 1:8). Worse yet, the tongue is **full of deadly poison** (cf. Ps. 140:3). Like the poison of a serpent, the tongue is loaded with the venom of hate and death-dealing gossip.

3:9-10. Similar to the forked tongue of a snake, man's uncontrolled **tongue** both emits **praise** and spews out curses. "Praise," or "saying a good word" (*eulogoumen*) of **our Lord and Father** (this is the only place where the NT uses this title of God) is polluted by a "curse," or "wishing evil" (*katarōmetha*) on **men... made in God's likeness** (cf. Gen. 1:27; 9:6; Col. 1:10). That both **praise and cursing** should **come from the same mouth** is incongruous. **My brothers, this should not be.**

3:11-12. Again James turned to the natural elements to illustrate his point. Anticipating a negative response, James asked, **Can both fresh** (lit., "sweet," *glyky*) **water and salt** (lit., "bitter," *pikron*) **water flow**, or "bubble up," **from the same spring? Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?** Of course not. **Neither** does **salt** (*halykon*) make **water** sweet (*glyky*). The point is clear: a believer's tongue should not be an instrument of inconsistency. Small and influential, the tongue must be controlled; satanic and infectious, the tongue must be corralled; salty and inconsistent, the tongue must be cleansed.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Control for Teachers (James 3:1)

I My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

Consider the decision of being a teacher

Because there is only one true Teacher and that is Jesus (Matt 23:8)

8 But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.

Because as a teacher we should speak what we know and have seen from God (John 3:10-12)

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

Because to be a teacher, one must have first been taught himself (Rom 2:17-21)

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, 18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. 21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

Because God appoints true teachers (1 Cor 12:28)

28 And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

Consider the accountability of being a teacher

Accountability to warn and tell others about God's requirements (Ezek 3:18-19)

18 When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.

Accountability of doing God's will when we know it (Luke 12:47-48)

47 And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. 48 But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

Accountability of faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2)

2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

Accountability of having to give account of those we teach (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Consider the judgment of being a teacher

Judgment of pride (Luke 20:45-47)

46 "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

Judgment of not understanding what we say or teach (1 Tim 1:5-7)

5 Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, 6 from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

Judgment of not teaching sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4)

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Judgment of not maturing in the Word (Heb 5:12)

12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

Judgment of being a false teacher (2 Peter 2:1)

1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

Judgment of being a stumbling block (Matt 23:15)

15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Control Tongue's Power (James 3:2-8)

2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.

5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Don't let the tongue make others stumble

Stumble into condemnation (Matt 12:37)

37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

It is better to lose our tongue than to let it make others stumble (Matt 5:29)

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Stumble by living according to the flesh (Rom 8:13)

13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Stumble by not disciplining our body and bringing it into subjection to God (1 Cor 9:27)

27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Power of the tongue

Power to be like a sword (Prov 12:18-19)

18 There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise promotes health. 19 The truthful lip shall be established forever, But a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Power of life and death (Prov 18:21)

21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.

Power to take advantage (Jude 16)

16 These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.

Power to defile oneself (Matt 15:11)

11 Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."

Power of poison and deceit (Rom 3:13)

13 "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips";

Taming the tongue

Tame by keeping our tongues from evil (Ps 34:13)

13 Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit.

Tame by guarding our tongues and ways (Ps 39:1)

1 I said, "I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, While the wicked are before me."

Tame by ensuring our tongues are guided by God (Prov 16:1)

1 The preparations of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Tame by guarding our mouth (Prov 21:23)

23 Whoever guards his mouth and tongue Keeps his soul from troubles.

Tame by bridling our tongues (James 1:26)

26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

Control Purity of Tongue (James 3:9-12)

9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.

10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?

12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

Control purity of tongue by rejecting sin

Sin affects tongues because sin makes the tongue cause one to be unclean (Matt 15:11)

11 What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Sin affects tongues because speaking rashly causes ruin (Prov 13:3)

3 He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.

Sin affects tongues because it keeps one from keeping control over their tongues (James 1:26)

26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Sin affects tongues if we allow our sinful natures to rule (Rom 3:12-14)

12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." 13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

Control purity of tongue by committing to guard speech

Commit to seek God to guarding our lips (Ps 141:3)

3 Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Commit to guarding our mouths (Prov 21:23)

23 He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.

Commit to muzzling our speech (Ps 39:1)

1 I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence."

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

A Word of Warning to Would-Be Teachers (James 3:1-2)

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly. 2 For we all stumble in many ways.

As we can see from verse 1, James is aiming his words of warning toward those I would call “wanna-be teachers.” His words of warning are usually softened in translation so that the force of the imperative is played down, as though he were giving a word of advice. The King James Version puts it as strongly as it should be, in my opinion:

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

I believe that James is speaking primarily to those who want to teach, who assert themselves as teachers, and yet should not be teachers at all. Let us consider why James would see this as a very serious problem, which he felt obliged to address.

First of all, adversity seems to attract many counselors and teachers who wish to instruct us as to why we are suffering. We see this in the Book of Job, where his three friends persist in trying to convince him that he is suffering because of some unconfessed sin, and not because of righteousness. In the end, God rebuked these men for not speaking what was true of Him (Job 42:7-9). Many are those with words of counsel and advice when we are suffering some kind of adversity. Many of these folks should give heed to these words of warning from James.³⁰

Second, there will always be those who seek to be teachers in order to promote their own interests. In Acts 20, we find Paul warning the elders of the church at Ephesus that even some of them will become false teachers, in order to gain a following:

30 Even **from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them.** 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:30-32, emphasis mine).

Third, there was a particular problem with “wanna-be teachers” within Judaism:

6 “They [the scribes and Pharisees] love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and **to have people call them ‘Rabbi’**” (Matthew 23:6-7, emphasis mine).

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relationship to God 18 and know his will and approve the superior things because you receive instruction from the law, 19 and if **you are convinced that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an educator of the senseless, a teacher of little children,** because you have in the law the essential features of knowledge and of the truth . . . (Romans 2:17-20, emphasis mine).

5 But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion. 7 **They want to be teachers of the law,** but they do not understand what they are saying or the things they insist on so confidently (1 Timothy 1:5-7, emphasis mine).

Jesus knew it and exposed it for what it was: The scribes and Pharisees were eager to be teachers because this was a place of status, and they were status-seekers. Paul points out the same problem. In Romans 1, Paul demonstrated why Gentiles are sinners, rightly under divine condemnation: they had the revelation of God in

nature and they rejected it, choosing to worship creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-23f.). The Jews were probably saying “Amen” throughout chapter 1, assuming that they were not Gentile sinners (see Galatians 2:15). But Paul has a shockingly different assessment of the Jews. Because they had been privileged to be the custodians of the Law, they felt that they had mastered the Law. They considered themselves the scholars, the experts in the Law, who should teach the ignorant what the Law was all about (see John 7:47-49). Paul found them guilty of failing to practice that which they taught (not unlike our Lord did in Matthew 23).

It did not take long for false teachers to begin to emerge in the New Testament church. A good portion of this false teaching came from Jewish false teachers, who seemed to feel that they had a higher level of understanding. They did not abide within sound doctrine, but were constantly engaged in speculation and word wars (1 Timothy 1:4-7; see also 2 Corinthians 11:3-5, 13-15, 22; Titus 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:23; 4:4).

Among those Jews who were dispersed abroad were those who felt that they were superior in knowledge, especially knowledge of matters pertaining to the Law, and so they were inclined to teach the ignorant. James tells them – indeed, orders them – to be very hesitant to teach, knowing that the judgment of teachers is more severe (James 1:1). Why would it be a more severe judgment? There are at least two reasons that James does not give in his epistle that we find elsewhere:

First, those who are teachers should have a greater knowledge of the truth, and thus they become more accountable.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b).

Second, we all will be judged according to our words, so teachers, whose work involves many words, will be more accountable.

36 “I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. 37 For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

Wishful Thinking: If the Tongue Could Only Be Tamed (James 3:2-4)

If someone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect individual, able to control the entire body as well. 3 And if we put bits into the mouths of horses to get them to obey us, then we guide their entire bodies. 4 Look at ships too: though they are so large and driven by harsh winds, they are steered by a tiny rudder wherever the pilot’s impulse directs.

James has instructed “wannabe teachers” that they should be hesitant to teach, because the judgment of teachers will be more severe. He has also indicated that all of us stumble in many ways (2a). James will now focus on a particular form of stumbling. He turns to the topic of stumbling in one’s speech, a timely topic for teachers. If a man does not stumble in what he says, then that man is perfect. If a man can perfectly control his tongue, then he would also be able to control every other part of his body as well. What a glorious thought! I fear that some would-be teachers might actually believe that they have mastered their tongues because they are able to master others with their tongue.

James has said that if a man can control his tongue, he can control his entire body. He now sets out to illustrate this tongue/totally principle, first with a horse, and then with a ship. In 1:26, James has already used the term “**bridle**,” and now he takes up the same term. Once the bit is in the horse’s mouth, the rider can control the entire body of the horse. One controls the entire horse by controlling its mouth. Next, James turns to the illustration of a ship. A ship is very large, and strong winds propel it; but when the captain has control of its very small rudder (comparatively speaking), he has control of the entire ship. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the tongue could be controlled? If a man could bring his tongue under control, then he could bring his whole body under control. But this will never happen, as James is about to show.

The Tongue Is Powerful, But Deadly, and Out of Control (James 3:5-8)

5 So too the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it has great pretensions. Think how small a flame sets a huge forest ablaze. 6 And the tongue is a fire! The tongue represents the world of wrongdoing among the parts of our bodies, that pollutes the entire body and sets fire to the course of human existence and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and sea creature is subdued and has been subdued by humankind. 8 But no human can subdue the tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

It took me a while to see the strong contrast James is making here. In the previous section (2b-4), James engaged in a little wishful thinking: If only the tongue could be tamed, then the whole body could be brought under control. Now, in verses 5-8, we see the ugly reality of the matter: The tongue cannot be controlled, and

there is a devastating result for the whole body – it is corrupted by the tongue. The key to our body’s control is also the key to our body’s destruction.

Like the rudder of a ship, the tongue is a very small member of the body, and it is powerful, but not in the way we would like to think. The tongue, James tells us, does “talk big.” It boasts, he says, of great things. The tongue is powerful, but often in a most destructive way. The tongue of man is like a fire, which sets a whole forest ablaze. My wife and I were driving through Montana this past summer, and we drove through one of the many forest fires which devastated that part of the country. A friend told us the story of how one of the many forest fires was started this summer. A grasshopper was somehow attached to the exhaust pipe of a car and caught on fire. The grasshopper sprung from the car and onto the ground, where this burning bug set a whole forest ablaze. A small flame can ignite a great fire.

The tongue, James tells us, is a fire, ignited by hell itself. The last part of verse 6 is very difficult for translators, but the sense of it is relatively simple. The tongue is a “**world of evil**,” which adversely impacts the rest of our bodies. If the tongue could be controlled, we could control the whole body. But since the tongue is a deadly fire and out of control, it wreaks havoc with the rest of the body. The whole gamut of humanity and society is set ablaze by the tongue.

How ironic it is that man is able to harness the power of a raging river, to prevent flooding, and to produce hydroelectric power. Man has learned to harness the power of the atom, for destructive and productive ends. Man has been able to subdue every kind of creature, from a parrot to a killer whale, and yet with all his success in bringing things under his control, man is powerless to control his own tongue. In verse 8, James switches from the imagery of fire to that of poison. The tongue is a restless evil, and its poison is deadly.

If the tongue could be controlled, the whole body could be controlled. But the fact of the matter is that the tongue – like a raging forest fire – is totally out of control and uncontrollable. And its great power is the power to destroy and corrupt. Isn’t it interesting that man can control the creatures of nature, but not himself? The one thing that distinguishes man from beast – the tongue – is the one thing that man cannot control. And if things are not bad enough, James goes on in verses 9-12 to give us even more bad news.

Worst of All, It Is Deceptive (James 3:9-12)

9 With it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse people made in God’s image. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. These things should not be so, my brothers and sisters. 11 A spring does not pour out fresh water and bitter water from the same opening, does it? 12 Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a vine produce figs? Neither can a salt-water spring produce fresh water.

Not only is the tongue destructive and completely out of control, the tongue is also deceptive. When I was growing up many years ago, I used to watch old-time western movies about “cowboys and Indians.” The Indians would sometimes say of the white man, “He speaks with forked tongue.” Today we would say, “He talks out of both sides of his mouth.” Unfortunately, this assessment is true. Once again, James will show us how completely unlike nature man is. In nature, “what you see is what you get.” A spring will either produce fresh water or bitter water, but it does not produce both. A fig tree produces figs, and not olives, and a vine does not produce figs. A salt-water spring does not produce fresh water. What something is by nature determines what it produces – and what it produces doesn’t change.

Man’s tongue is different. Sad as it may be, the tongue is capable of producing both blessing and cursing, as different as these things may be. At one moment, my tongue may speak words of truth and blessing, with absolute sincerity. Just moments later, it may speak something terrible, something corrupt. We can see this truth illustrated by the tongue of Peter:

13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 **Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** 17 And Jesus answered him, **“You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven!** 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.” 20 Then he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. 21 From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 **So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you.”** 23 But he turned and **said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a**

stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's" (Matthew 16:13-23, emphasis mine).

Within the space of a few moments (and a few verses), Peter has changed from being a spokesman for God to speaking for Satan. This is exactly what James is saying; the same tongue can both bless and curse. We cannot trust the words of the tongue because they can so quickly change to something completely different.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/3-taming-tongue-james-31-18>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's lesson concerns the destructive power of the tongue. Specifically, it deals with the words spoken by those who were recognized as teachers in the first-century church (and perhaps those who aspired to that role). Their words were of special concern to James because they involved matters that have an eternal import. All of us can think of ways in which words spoken by teachers have had beneficial or damaging effects on the lives of their hearers. Words should be a source of spiritual growth and sustenance. But how many of us have seen church splits that resulted from ill-advised words? How many of us have seen men and women leave the faith because of spiritually damaging utterances? These concerns lie at the heart of today's text. James's description of the tongue may lead us to conclude that attempting to control it is hopeless. Admittedly, the tongue is extremely difficult to control, as we know all too well. All of us have said things that we came to regret. What is more, the work of taming the tongue is a lifelong task. While today's text directly addressed teachers, it calls on all Christians to examine themselves. Are we faithfully using our powers of speech daily? Do we speak words of truth and grace consistently at home, on the job, and in church? Are our critiques healing or destructive? These are questions for everyone, no matter what position or stage of life. In effect, we are all teachers on some level, by our tongues as well as the examples we set.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Educate Wisely - Teaching and interpreting God's Word may look like a glamorous job, but those who stand up to instruct people representing God need to take this responsibility extremely seriously. Also, a walk of integrity should go hand in hand with this responsibility. This calling to interpret the Scriptures can influence the heart of people to go one way or another.

A Life of Integrity - No human being will teach the Bible 100% correctly, nor have a completely pure, sin-free life. James did not call for perfection. However, a teacher needs to humbly ask God for His help and empowerment to live with integrity because teaching is not in the background but upfront, helping people come to a greater understanding of God. What teachers say should not be self-centered, boastful, overly critical, gossipy, or insincere, but instead help students to see God's love for them.

Tongue Control - James used examples to show the influence of one's speech. He described the tongue as a small instrument controlling something of greater magnitude, like a boat regulated by a tiny rudder or a healthy horse put in check by a little bit in his mouth. A tiny wooden match can cause a major forest fire. The tongue can speak truthfully or tell lies causing a person to go in a constructive or destructive direction. James admitted that bringing the tongue under control is quite the task. Animals are more natural to tame. No human can bring their tongue under submission on their own; divine intervention is needed. The Holy Spirit should take over, communicating to the individual to be quiet or to speak up.

What Is Your Reputation? - It is impossible for a Christian's tongue to go in two different directions at the same time, praising God and at the same time ripping apart another brother or sister. A woman once came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was: "I think my talent from God is to speak my mind." Wesley replied, "I do not think God would mind if you buried that talent." One's conversation is a good indication of what is rumbling around on the inside of the heart, labeling the person as wise or foolish.