

James 3:1-12

Why should we hesitate before becoming a teacher (v. 1)? Because teachers will be judged more strictly. James warns about the greater accountability of teachers if they fail to practice what they preach. He is most likely addressing the unofficial teachers in the synagogue meetings who were invited to speak as a courtesy.

Why is there a greater degree of accountability for teachers? Because there is added responsibility before God and man. Leaders are able to influence, shape hearts and lives, and point others down the right or wrong path. They are under greater scrutiny. They should have a greater knowledge of the truth. A teacher must be prepared to obey. His/her walk must match his/her talk.

Verse 1 might be paraphrased, "Do not become unduly ambitious to be a teacher." This should not be interpreted as a prohibition against the use of a spiritual gift by one who actually has been called by God to teach. In James' day many were clamoring to be teachers with the wrong motives and the wrong gifting.

In Chapter 1:19, 26, James talked about being slow to speak and keeping a tight rein on our tongues. **The fact that he returns to talk about it again is an indication of what?** How important that control of our tongues is to God. Repetition = emphasis. He knows we have a problem with the tongue – control is difficult. God's goal is that we bless others with our speech.

Why is the man who is never at fault in what he says (able to control his tongue) considered perfect (v. 2)? We are all prone to stumble in many areas but if anyone can control his tongue, so that he does not commit the various sins of speech, that person is truly well-rounded and well-disciplined. If one can exercise control in speech, he should not have difficulty in practicing self-control in other areas of life as well.

A believer's speech is a reliable measure of inner character and spiritual maturity. Of course, the Lord Jesus Christ is the only One who ever controlled His tongue completely, but there is a sense in which each of us can become perfect, that is, mature, complete, thoroughly disciplined.¹ The Greek word for *perfect* in 3:2 is the same as *mature* in 1:4 and *complete* in 2:22.

It is interesting to note that James says that all of us stumble in many ways (v. 2), but he doesn't use it as an excuse. Often times people say, "Well, no one's perfect" or "I'm only human." Both are feeble excuses to rationalize our behavior. James merely states it as a fact of life.

The rabbis of ancient days said that the tongue was like a deadly arrow, because an arrow can kill at a distance. And the deadliness of the tongue is such that it can kill without being anywhere near the victim. In fact, every one of us is carrying around a concealed weapon. All we have to do is open our mouths and it's no longer concealed.

What are some examples of improper use of the tongue? Complaining, negativity, cursing, gossip, criticism, exaggeration/embellishment, boasting, etc. **Is it safe to say that the improper use of the tongue is sin?**

Five illustrations of the tongue are given in vv. 3-8.

1. **What point is James trying to make in v. 3 with the horse and bit comparison to the tongue?** Small things have a great and powerful effect. If a person can control that small bit, he can control the behavior of the horse.
2. **What point is James trying to make in v. 4 with the ship and rudder comparison to the tongue?** A small rudder can guide a large ship. Don't misjudge the power of the tongue by its size. It can boast of great accomplishments both good and evil.
3. **How is the tongue compared to a fire in vv. 5-6?** The tongue is small but it makes great boasts. A spark or a small match can cause devastating damage. Just look at the wildfires that occur every year in the west. In the same way, the potential of the tongue for inflicting damage is almost infinite. It can spread like wildfire to inflame all the areas of life that we touch.
4. **How is the tongue compared/contrasted to a wild animal in v. 7?** All kinds of beasts can be tamed from elephants to birds of prey to dolphins to charming snakes. With enough time and persistence probably any

animal could be tamed. But, unlike taming animals, man cannot tame the tongue. Animals can be tamed because God gave man rule over them at creation (Genesis 1:26, 28).

5. **How is the tongue a restless evil, full of deadly poison (v. 8)?** Like a snake with poisonous venom, a small amount is deadly. The tongue can poison hearts and minds and assassinate the character of people through gossip, criticism, belittling.

Why is man unable to control his tongue (v. 8)? What is our problem? Because of the fall....our sinful nature is the problem. James was picturing human behavior apart from the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit. Human nature, in and of itself, does not have the ability or strength to govern this little member. Only God can bring it under control.²

Children are told, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But that child’s rhyme isn’t really true. The bitter pain and lasting consequences of a critical or demeaning word spoken against us can hurt for a lifetime, long after a broken bone would have healed.

Why is it wrong to curse or verbally abuse another human being (v. 9)? They are made in the image of God. God loves them and cares for them. They are His creation.

Application: Peter struggled to control his tongue, especially when he denied Jesus three times. What are some specific areas of your life or speech over which you would like to have more control?

What is the point of vv. 9-12? The tongue should not be an instrument of inconsistency. We honor God with our words, but then we turn right around and dishonor or curse people who have been made in His image. Our speech and behavior should be a measure of character – they should be the same at home/work/play.

Since no man can control the tongue, is there any hope? How can we have an increasing degree of control over our tongues? Since no man can control the tongue, God has to bring it under control. Pray daily that God will do exactly that. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Before you speak, ask the questions: “Is what I’m about to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?”

Reflect on/memorize these verses:

- “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalms 141:3).
- “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalms 19:14).
- “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

Ultimately, the *heart* is the key to controlling the tongue. “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12:34-36).

James is not calling for more will-power and self-determination to control our tongues. If the tongue is set on fire by hell, then only heaven can help us. And God has provided us with this help. He has given those of us who have placed their trust in Him a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). And we are to be keepers of the heart, so that the thoughts of our heart are on Him who died for us.

Application: The bridle, the rudder and the fire (of which James paints a negative picture), like the tongue, can all do tremendous *good* when they are controlled properly. **What are some positive ways to use the tongue?** Praise, recognition, compliment, encouragement.

¹ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 2231.

² Ibid., 2232.