

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Theme: "The Testing of Your Faith"

Lesson: 22

Text: 3:1-10

Date: 8-13-23

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TEXT AND STUDY NOTES

- (1) *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*
- (2) *For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*

(1 Ki 8:46; Ps 39:1; Prov 10:19; 20:9; Eccl 7:20; Mt 12:37; 23:1-33; Lk 11:45,46,52; Ac 13:1; Rom 2:20,21; 3:9-20; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Gal 1:8,9; Eph 4:11;

1 Tim 1:7; 3:1-6; Titus 1:7-9; 1 Pet 3:10; 1 Jn 1:8)

- (3) If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.
- (4) Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.
- (5) So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.
How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!
- (6) And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.
The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

(Ps 12:3,4; 32:9; 57:4; 73:8,9; 120:2-4; Prov 16:27; Mt 5:22; 15:11-19; Mk 7:14-23; Lk 16:23; Jn 8:44)

- (7) For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,
- (8) but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

(Ps 140:3; Eccl 10:11; Rom 3:13)

(9) With it **we bless our Lord and Father**, and with it we curse people who are made **in the likeness of God**.

(10) From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.
My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

(Gen 1:26-28; 1 Cor 11:7)

James' admonitions concerning the proper use of the tongue has its specific target in the clergy,³ but the general arguments are by extension, of course, applicable to all Christians. The reference to the perfect man who is able to refrain from sinning or from making mistakes when he speaks follows James' warning about too quickly assuming the task of explaining Christian doctrine. He is not speaking about absolute sinlessness or even proposing it as a possibility. In the first part of this very verse James rules out any possibility that Christians can avoid sin in their lives, but it is possible for them to avoid making mistakes in their official speaking as preachers. The preacher who properly conveys the divine message is called “a perfect man.” Several problems are presented here. What are meant by sinning, making mistakes, and a perfect man? Since all make mistakes, a perfect man cannot be one who overcomes sin in his life. In the light of 3:1 with its special warning for teachers, a perfect (*teleios*) man would be one who conforms his teachings as pastor to the words of Jesus. Perfection here describes not so much the moral quality of the person, but rather the understanding of God's mind, from which perspective he refrains from bringing down curses upon those redeemed by God (3:10). He not only understands God's loving attitude to men, but is able to express it in his preaching and teaching. He resembles the wise man in the Sermon on the Mount who builds his house on a sure foundation (Matt. 7:24-25).

The analogy of the rudder has even more interesting possibilities. In 2 Peter 2:17 the false teachers are compared to directionless winds, unlike the holy writers, who are directed (*pheromenoi*) by the Holy Spirit (*pneumatou hagiou* 1:21). Heb. 13:9 gives a warning about being “led away (*parapheresthe*) by diverse and strange teachings.” Paul in Eph. 4:14 also uses nautical language in describing the haplessness of Christians confronted by false doctrines. “So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine (*peripheromenoi panti anemō tēs didaskalias*).”

With the analogy of the tossed wave James in 1:6 was speaking of the doctrinal directionlessness of Christian pastors, as he is again doing with the ship's rudder in 3:4. The pastors' first obligation is to keep their evil natures so under control that they do not abruptly express themselves, and their second is setting a straight course which does not succumb to every change of doctrine they encounter. With these illustrations of the bridle and the rudder James is offering a positive directive for use of the tongue. Slipping into doctrinal mistakes can be avoided in the same way. Bo Reicke sees James' image of the ship as a reference to the church, with the rudder as the pastor.⁵ If this is so, then the tongue ruining the body refers to the pastor's influence in the church.

LIFE APPLICATION

“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.
How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”

Why do our tongues cause both tragedy and blessing?