

## James 3:3-12

### I. Our Speech is dangerous (3-8)

#### A. Speech is a powerful force for evil (3-6)

##### 1. The tongue has great influence, disproportionate to its small size (3-5)

In this section, the tongue could refer to speech in general.

But in the context of v. 1, the tongue could refer more specifically to speech of teachers

##### a Just as small things can have great influence (3-4)

James uses two illustrations (a horse and a ship) of a large thing controlled by something small in order to make the point about the large potential of the tongue despite its small size

##### 1) A big horse is controlled by a small bit (3)

##### a) Condition: If we bridle a horse with a small bit (3a-b)

(1) If we put the bridles of horses in their mouths (3a)

(2) Purpose: in order to make them obedient to us (3b)

##### b) Result: we will guide their entire bodies (3c)

There are two points of emphasis here:

First is the contrast between the small size of the bit and the large size of the horse that is controlled by it

Second is the bit put in the mouth (foreshadowing the emphasis on speech in the rest of the context), which controls the entire animal

##### 2) A big boat is controlled by a small rudder (4)

##### a) Even though the boat is so large and under such great power (4a-b)

(1) Being so large (4a)

(2) And being driven along by strong winds (4b)

The point is the size of the ship and the size of the power that propels it, compared with the smallness of what guides it, as seen in the next proposition

##### b) It is guided by so small a rudder (4c-d)

(1) Behold the boat is also guided by so small a rudder (4c)

(2) Wherever the desire of the pilot wants (4d)

The small rudder controls the large ship, out of proportion to their relative sizes

##### b A small tongue has great influence (5)

##### 1) In the same way, the small tongue boasts of great things (5a-b)

a) In the same way, the tongue is also a small member (5a)

b) And it boasts great things (5b)

##### 2) Behold, how small a fire sets ablaze how great a forest (5c)

2. The tongue is an instrument of evil and destruction (6)
  - a The tongue is a destructive force in many ways (6a-b)
    - 1) The tongue is a fire (6a)
 

James does not explain this metaphor here, but from the later context, it is obvious that he is emphasizing the destructive potential of fire
    - 2) [The tongue is] the totality of evil (6b)
 

Literally – “world of evil”  
 “World” probably has the connotation of sum total, tremendous amount of evil  
 Therefore, the emphasis is that all potential evil is contained in the tongue  
 There is no part of evil that is not available or possible for the tongue
  - b The tongue ruins all parts of our life (6c-f)
    - 1) The tongue is being brought about in our members (6c)
 

This is a very literal translation - the tongue “happens” in our entire self  
 This probably means something like, “the tongue makes its mark/makes an influence” on all our members  
 If the tongue refers to teachers, this proposition emphasizes that teachers influence the entire congregation (every member)  
 Its influence is elaborated in the following propositions
    - 2) The effects of the tongue are destructive and defiling (6d-f)
      - a) [The tongue is] The thing defiling the whole body (6d)
 

This possibly refers to [bad] teachers leading the entire congregation into false doctrine
      - b) The tongue is destructive fire (6e-f)
        - (1) And setting on fire the course of existence (6e)
 

Just like a forest is set ablaze by a small fire, so all of life is destroyed by the fire of the tongue  
 The tongue can (and often does) destroy every part of life
        - (2) And being set on fire by hell (6f)
 

This could possibly refer to the source of the tongue's evil influence – “It spreads the fire which it caught from hell”  
 Or it could refer to the destiny of the tongue's evil influence – “It will experience the fire of hell as punishment for its evil deeds”

**B. Reason: The tongue is uncontrollable (7-8)**

1. All kinds of animals have been tamed by humans (7)
  - a For every kind of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature are being tamed (7a)
 

Note that it says every category, not every species, it uses the same four categories of animals as Gen. 1:26  
 James is using hyperbole to set up for the coming contrast  
 These are the main categories of animals that the Bible uses: beasts, birds, creeping things, and sea creatures  
 Of course, these are not the same categories used by modern zoology, but they are still a valid and logical way to categorize animals based on observation  
 This first verb states that they can be tamed in general

b And they have been tamed by human nature (7b)

This second verb goes to state not only that they can be tamed, but they also have been tamed

There is a word play here, the nature of the animals is tamed by the nature of humans

2. But the tongue is untamable (8)

a But no one of all humanity is able to tame the tongue (8a)

This emphasizes by contrast with tamable animals how uncontrollable the tongue is

b Reason: It is uncontrollable and deadly (8b-c)

1) It is an uncontrollable evil (8b)

“uncontrollable” has the connotation of restless and unstable, you can never know what the tongue might do, cf. 1:8

“evil” is a generic term for all that is bad and harmful

2) It is full of death-giving poison (8c)

Full in the sense of completeness, abundance, cf. v. 17

Full of deadly poison, that which brings death

Careless words and false teaching have the potential to bring death

II. The conclusion: Our speech is characterized by insane confusion (9-12)

A. Our Speech is an unreasonable contradiction (9-10)

1. The tongue produces confused and contradictory results (9-10a)

a With the tongue, we bless God and curse men in His image (9)

1) Pos: By it, we bless the Lord and Father (9a)

2) Neg: And by it, we curse men, who exist according to the likeness of God (9b)

referencing Gen. 1:26

b Blessing and cursing go out from the same mouth (10a)

This goes against what is expected and reasonable

2. My brothers, these things should not be this way (10b)

This is a contradiction and hypocrisy, and should not happen

People do it, but only because they don't examine what they are doing

When it is pointed out what a contradiction it is, James expects his readers to agree that this goes against what is right and reasonable

B. Reason: This is an unnatural contradiction (11-12)

Because this goes against logic and nature, it should not happen

This is a clear sign that something is wrong and should be fixed

1. Can a spring pour forth from the same outlet fresh water and bitter? (11)

This question is phrased in such a way as to assume a negative answer

2. My brothers, is a fig tree able to produce olives? (12a)

3. Or a grapevine to produce figs? (12b)

Both of these are referencing Jesus' words in Matt. 7:16-20

4. Neither can a salty spring produce fresh water (12c)