

# The Tongue Is a Fire (James 3:1-12)

---

1. Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.
2. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.
3. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.
4. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.
5. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!
6. And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.
7. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.
8. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.
9. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;
10. from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.
11. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?
12. Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh. (James 3:1-12 NASB1995)

## Outline:

- I. A Warning to Teachers (vv.1-2a)
- II. A Warning to Speakers (vv.2b-8)
- III. A Warning to Praisers (vv.9-12)

Worksheet:

I. A Warning to Teachers (vv.1-2a)

a. Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. (v.1)

i. **Who** is James talking to in this verse? \_\_\_\_\_

ii. **What** kind? \_\_\_\_\_

iii. **What** is his warning to them? \_\_\_\_\_

iv. **Why** is he warning them? \_\_\_\_\_

v. **What** is the risk of “many” becoming teachers and its impact on *learners*?  
[discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

vi. **What** is the risk of “many” becoming teachers and its impact on *teachers*? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

vii. **What** does James consider himself to be? \_\_\_\_\_  
**What** kind of teacher does he consider himself to be? (James 1:1)  
[discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

viii. **How** should that impact the perspective of those who would consider being a “teacher” today? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

ix. **What** can be expected by teachers who will “incur a stricter judgement”, both unbelieving false teachers and believing true teachers? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

1. It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage. (Jude 1:14-16 NASB)

2. Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am

conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5 NASB)

b. For we all stumble in many ways. (v.2a)

i. **What** does this term "stumble" mean in this verse? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

ii. **Stumble:** *[ptaio]* - to cause one to stumble or fall; to stumble; to err, make a mistake, to sin; to fall into misery, become wretched.

iii. **What** ways do "we all stumble" *[list some]*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

iv. **What** are the implications of this from a spiritual standpoint? *[discussion]*

v. **What** are the implications of this from an eternal perspective? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

## II. A Warning to Speakers (vv.2b-8)

a. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (v.2b)

i. This is a bold statement! **What**, according to James, is that which keeps an individual from being "a perfect man"? \_\_\_\_\_

ii. If a man was theoretically able to "not stumble in what he says", he would also be able to "\_\_\_\_\_ the whole \_\_\_\_\_ as well."

iii. According to James, **what** type of sin seems to be the *biggest* obstacle for man in terms of his ability to practice self control? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

iv. Is it possible for a man to "not stumble in what he says" while in the flesh? **Why** or **Why not?** *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

v. **What** does "bridle the whole body" mean? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

- vi. **Bridle:** [*chalinagogo*] - to lead by a bridle, to guide; to bridle, hold in check, restrain.
  1. This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20 NASB)
  2. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. (James 1:26 NASB)

vii. **How** should these verses impact and serve as a warning to those who speak? [*discussion*] \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

- viii. **How** does bridling the tongue apply to a believers:
  1. "leading": \_\_\_\_\_
  2. "guiding": \_\_\_\_\_
  3. "holding in check": \_\_\_\_\_
  4. "restraining": \_\_\_\_\_

- b. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (v.3)
  - i. James uses the analogy of bits that "we" put into "the horses' mouths" used to "direct their entire body as well." How does this relate to the speech that comes out of a person's mouth and the actions of that person done with the entire body? [*discussion*] \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii. What acts as the proverbial "bit" in the mouths of believers, that controls their speech and the actions of the whole or entire body as well? [*discussion*] \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

1. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25 NASB)
2. Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:3 NASB1995)
3. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (Galatians 5:16-18 NASB1995)
4. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. (Galatians 5:25-26 NASB1995)

5. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:12 NASB)
  6. But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. (Matthew 10:19-20 NASB)
- iii. **What** in accordance with this verse, is the end result that God wants to be evident in us as we are controlled by and lead by the Spirit of God?  
*[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. (v.4)
- i. James uses the great ships of the sea, with their sails driven by the strong winds and small rudders controlled by the pilot, to illustrate the power of speech and the tongue that controls the path of individuals who speak and impacts the lives of those spoken to.
  - ii. These physical **analogies** that James uses to illustrate spiritual concepts are not meant to be **allegories**, however there are some allegorical implications and connections that can be made that may be helpful.
  - iii. **Analogy**: a comparison between two things, typically for the purpose of explanation or clarification.
  - iv. **Allegory**: a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one. In a spiritual sense, a “type”. *[example: “Pilgrim’s Progress”]*
  - v. **What** are some of the “great ships” of humanity in the sea of the world?
    1. \_\_\_\_\_
    2. \_\_\_\_\_
    3. \_\_\_\_\_
    4. \_\_\_\_\_
  - vi. **What** could one compare the “sails” to as it pertains to humans, keeping in mind the *function* of a sail? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  - vii. **How** does the size and position of the “sails” that are driven by the strong winds effect the ships direction and velocity? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  - viii. **What** are some of the “strong winds” that drive teachers and people in general? *[list]*

Positive	Negative
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.

- d. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (v.5)
- i. James in this passage uses a literary device, as did many Jewish writers, to ascribe blame or condemnation upon a part of the human body (the tongue in this case) misused by man that ultimately leads to judgement by God in holy righteousness.
    1. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:29-30 NASB)
    2. “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matthew 6:22-23 NASB)
    3. “Their throat is an open grave , With their tongues they keep deceiving ,” “The poison of asps is under their lips ”; “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness ”; “Their feet are swift to shed blood, Destruction and misery are in their paths, And the path of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:13-18 NASB)
    4. having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; (2 Peter 2:14 NASB)
  - ii. What are some of the characteristics of the tongue as described by James in this verse? *[list]*
    1. The tongue is \_\_\_\_\_.
    2. The tongue is part of the \_\_\_\_\_.
    3. The \_\_\_\_\_ of great things despite its size.
  - iii. In light of these characteristics, what can be said about the tongue? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_
  - iv. \_\_\_\_\_

v. Given that the tongue is compared to a small fire that has the potential to consume a whole forest, how should this guide believers as it pertains to the use of their tongues? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

vi. **Application:** What are some ways that believers use their tongues, both for *positive* and *negative* ends and/or motives? *[list]*

Positive	Negative
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.

e. And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (v.6)

i. James, in verse 5 of this passage, says that the tongue is a “small fire”. Small fires start as sparks, which need *oxygen* and something *combustible* to turn into a raging, consuming fire. The devastation of the fire that ensues can be made even worse if there is an *accelerant*. To stop a fire from starting, spreading and getting worse, these elements must be removed. How can this concept be related to the fires that start as a result of the human tongue? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

ii. \_\_\_\_\_

iii. **Questions to ponder:** What or who is the source of the fire? What or who is the oxygen? What or who is the combustible material? What or who is the accelerant? What or who is the extinguisher of the fire?

f. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. (v.7)

i. James by use of comparison, draws attention to the fact that man throughout human history has demonstrated and displayed his remarkable ability to tame some of the most ferocious, most massive, wildest animals in the sea, on land and in the air.

ii. What can be said about the animals that have been tamed by man when compared to the human tongue, which by comparison is much smaller and untamable by man? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

g. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

(v.8)

i. If no man “can tame the tongue”, then can the tongue be tamed? \_\_\_\_\_.  
If so, **how** or by whom? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

ii. Given the description of the tongue in this verse, “restless evil” and “full of deadly poison”, **what** does this say about the nature and characteristics of the human tongue and its effect on **bearer** of the tongue and **hearer** of the tongue? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

iii. What image is conjured up when picturing the human tongue as a “restless evil”? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

iv. What image is conjured up when picturing the human tongue as being “full of deadly poison”? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

### III. A Warning to Praisers (vv.9-12)

a. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; (v.9)

i. The NIV bible uses the word “praise” in place of “bless” which is used in the NASB. James continues with a scorching and scathing rebuke those believers who use their tongue to “bless our Lord and Father” and then turn around and use that same tongue to “curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God”.

ii. **What** is the significance of saying “curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God”? [discussion] \_\_\_\_\_

iii. **Why** is this important? What other areas of human life might this apply as it pertains to humans being “image bearer” of God? \_\_\_\_\_

1. God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.  
(Genesis 1:27 NASB1995)

2. Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man. As for you, be fruitful and multiply; Populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it.”  
(Genesis 9:6-7 NASB1995)

b. from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. (v.10)



- i. James is telling his readers that one source (the human tongue) “the mouth” should not spring forth from the mouth “conflicting or opposing” output, or speech in the case of the mouth.
  - ii. How do believers know if it is ok to “bless” God and “curse” men with the same mouth? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - iii. Does this mean that you should just “keep silent” when you see unjust and unrighteous acts being perpetrated by people? *[discussion]* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - iv. How are believers encouraged to respond according to James? (James 1:19,20)  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? (v.11)
- i. James gives another illustration about a fountain and the possibility of it having two opposing sources; one with “fresh” water and the other with “bitter” water. He does this by once again using a rhetorical question. What is the response to the question posed by James in v.11? \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii. If this illustration was to be allegorized, answer these:
    1. What is the well/**source**? The human \_\_\_\_\_.
    2. What is the pump? The human \_\_\_\_\_.
    3. What is the conduit/pipe/**fountain**? The human \_\_\_\_\_.
  - iii. What comes from the \_\_\_\_\_ depends on the \_\_\_\_\_ from whence it has come.
    1. But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.  
(Matthew 15:18 NASB1995)
    2. And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”  
(Mark 7:20-23 NASB1995)
    3. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.  
(Matthew 12:34 NASB1995)
    4. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

(Luke 6:44-45 NASB1995)

d. Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh. (v.12)

i. It would seem that James inclusion of this verse might possibly indicate that he was influenced by the gospel writers who penned these verses:

1. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?

(Matthew 7:16 NASB1995)

2. "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

(Matthew 12:33-37 NASB1995)

3. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

(Luke 6:44-45 NASB1995)

ii. James goes on to conclude that bases on how these principles exist in nature, a source of "salt water" cannot produce at the same time "fresh water".

1. Looking at the use of "salt water" (bitter) compared to "fresh water" (refreshing) and the utility of them both, which one is more beneficial to one who thirsts? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Does this mean that the body does not need "salt water" (0.9NS) at all? \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Is salt water better as a disinfectant than fresh water? \_\_\_\_\_

4. This shows one of the dangers of **allegorizing** a text that is not intended to be so interpreted.

5. Don't miss the point of the verse! What is it saying? [discussion]

---

---

---