

James turns his attention to the unruly and destructive nature of our tongues, the part of our anatomy that is the hardest to bring into submission to God's will. It takes God's wisdom to control our tongue as well as to control our pride and selfishness. James describes the difference between the world's wisdom (a source of jealousy and strife) and God's wisdom, which fosters an attitude of peace.

2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

“For in many things we offend [stumble; make a mistake; sin] all” – This verse expands on v. 1, where James cautions those who would be a “master” (teacher). Teachers (as well as preachers) have a great responsibility before God because they seek to educate others in the things of God. In this verse, James points out that we all (including teachers) are flawed human beings that make mistakes and sin in many ways. Therefore teachers should never think of themselves as spiritually superior to those that they teach since they also have a flawed sin nature.

“If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect [complete; mature] man, and able also to bridle the whole body” – James now begins teaching us about the volatility of our tongue and states that any man who is able to control his tongue and not sin because of it is spiritually mature enough to control the rest of his body and its actions. The tongue is difficult to control because it reveals the sinfulness of our own hearts. **Luke 6:45** *“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.”*

3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

James loves to use real world examples to illustrate his points and he now gives us two examples of large objects being controlled by small objects. The first is a horse that is steered by a small bit in his mouth and the second is a great ship that is steered by a small rudder.

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

“Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things” – Just like the the horse's bit and the ship's rudder are small things that exert a great influence over larger objects, the tongue exerts an influence that dwarfs its small size. The tongue can do great good or great evil through the words that it speaks.

“Behold, how great a matter [wood; a forest] a little fire kindleth!” – The Greek word translated “matter” refers to wood, which could either be trees that have already been cut down as firewood or already used to build a house. It can also refer to a forest of trees. James is pointing out the power of fire to spread from the smallest flame or even a single spark. Under the right conditions, a single match has the ability to burn down an entire forest or a town.

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity [unrighteousness]” – The tongue has the same potential for widespread destruction as fire does. James characterizes it as “a world of iniquity,” indicating that the tongue is capable of a wide range of unrighteousness.

“so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body” – The tongue gives expression to the sinfulness of our heart. **Mark 7:20-23** *“And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.”*

“and setteth on fire the course [wheel] of nature [genesis – origins; birth; beginning of life]” – Commentators suggest that “course of nature” could be better translated as “circle of life.” James is emphasizing the destructive nature of the tongue, saying that it can destroy (“setteth on fire”) the direction of not only our own life, but that of others.

“and it is set on fire of hell” – Not only can our tongues express the sinfulness of our own hearts, but James acknowledges that Satan can also influence what we say to amplify the damage and sin that our words can do.

7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Even the wildest beasts on earth have been or can be tamed [Greek: to tame or restrain] and brought into subjection to man, as intended by God (**Genesis 1:26, 28** *“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. ...And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”).* In contrast to the wild beasts, man cannot tame his own tongue because he cannot overcome the sinfulness of his own heart, which is what gives the tongue its deadly poison and makes it such an unruly [unable to be restrained; uncontrollable] evil.

9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

“Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men” – It was a Jewish tradition to add “blessed be He” to any mention of God’s name. James says “therewith” (using our tongue) we will bless God and also use that same tongue to curse (to declare evil upon) men. In one breath we exalt God and in the next we are expressing ill will and harm toward our fellow man.

“which are made after the similitude [likeness] of God” – Men are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), therefore to curse men is to indirectly curse God.

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

James points out the moral contradiction that the same mouth can produce both blessing and cursing. This is a situation that should never happen in the life of a Christian, who should always be a source of blessing to others.

Verses 11-12: To further make his point, James asks the rhetorical questions about whether a fountain can produce both fresh water and bitter water, whether a fig tree or a grape vine can produce other kinds of fruit. Of course, none of the things James mentions can produce results contrary to their nature. The implication is that a Christian’s speech should be consistent with his/her nature as a child of God, only producing blessing and not cursing.

13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge [intelligent; understanding] among you?” – James appeals to those who had become wise and knowledgeable in living for God through their study of scripture. This appeal could also be to those who wish to be wise and knowledgeable.

“let him shew out of a good conversation [behavior; conduct] his works with meekness [gentleness] of wisdom” – The human tendency is for someone who is intelligent to become proud and act superior to others. James urges these people to conduct themselves in a manner so that their works demonstrate gentleness as they share their wisdom with others. We are to share any wisdom that we’ve learned with others in a humble manner, not acting like we are superior to them.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

“But if ye have bitter envying and strife [selfish ambition] in your hearts, glory not” – The Greek word translated “strife” was often used to describe politicians who selfishly promoted themselves at the detriment of their opponent. Here, James says that the wise and intelligent people have nothing to be proud of if they are endeavoring to make themselves look superior to others. Such people tend to become jealous of anyone who might be considered to have superior wisdom (“bitter envying”).

“and lie not against the truth” – For such people to have bitter envying and strife against others proves that they are not as wise and knowledgeable as they would like to think. Their pride and self-promotion are a “lie...against the truth” of the gospel that teaches us that we ought to be humble since we are all sinful human beings in desperate need of God’s grace.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

“This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly [from the earth], sensual [of the breath], devilish [from an evil spirit or resembling one]” – The wisdom that causes bitter envying and strife is not from God above but is human wisdom that comes from the earth (not heaven), natural or unspiritual (from the flesh), and either comes from or resembles the behavior of evil spirits.

“For where envying and strife is, there is confusion [instability; disorder; chaos] and every evil work” – Those who jealously try to promote themselves as more wise than others sow the seeds of chaos where “every evil work” can occur and thrive. God’s wisdom is never the source of such things.

17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

“But the wisdom that is from above” – James will now contrast this worldly, fleshly wisdom with God’s wisdom, which comes “from above.” This is the wisdom that God will give to those who ask in faith (James 1:5-7).

“is first pure [without sinful motives], then peaceable [seeking peace], gentle [mild], and easy to be intreated [compliant]” – God’s wisdom does not have the sinful motives of being self-seeking or creating strife with others, and instead seeks to be at peace with them, treating them with gentleness. God’s wisdom also makes the person compliant with God’s will as well as with the requests of others.

“full of mercy and good fruits” – God’s wisdom will cause a person to be merciful to others and to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

“without partiality [unwavering; without uncertainty], and without hypocrisy [sincere; genuine]” – God’s wisdom causes a person to be unwavering in their commitment to obey God. There is no doubt that they will choose to do the right thing when tempted to do otherwise. They are also sincere – what you see is what you get. They do not pretend to be something they are not.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Christians governed by the wisdom of God will exhibit the righteousness that results from salvation with an attitude of peace toward others. This is in contrast with those governed by the world’s wisdom (vs. 14-16).