

'The Tongue is a Fire'

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet 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 exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

1. Taming the Tongue (3.1-12)

(1) Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. In the introduction to the letter, James has introduced the topic of wisdom. This is a key theme of the epistle and from the beginning of chapter 3, James turns to this subject in more detail. The Greek word for 'Wisdom' is *sophia*. It is one of the roots of the word 'philosophy'. One of the things that we often forget is that the first Christians did not think of Christianity as 'a religion'. They thought of it more as 'a philosophy', but in the ancient sense of that term, as 'a way of life'. It was a practical wisdom, which you lived out. Christ is the source of all wisdom. Given the prominence of wisdom, it is no surprise that James turns to the role of the teacher and those who exercise the teaching office in the church. Not all are called to this office – but is he suggesting that people in the church were seeking to attain this status in order to compensate for other forms of social oppression? James emphasises the responsibility of the role: teachers have a greater responsibility to teach and to act accordingly. **(2) For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.** And yet even teachers are fallible! Who knew that the phrase 'We all make mistakes' comes from James 3.2? Although note the qualification 'in speaking'. James will return to this in a moment, but some commentators have taken this phrase *en logo* to mean 'in doctrine' and suggest that James is simply speaking about doctrinal error at this point. Note that this verse also speaks into the whole debate in the early church about post-baptismal sin, but it also echoes what James has to say earlier in the letter about mercy. **'check with a bridle'** The verb *chalinagoo* prepares for the Greek word *chalinós* 'a bridle' in the next verse. The term 'bridle' introduces a series of examples to illustrate James' warning. It also echoes the 'slow to speak' of 1.19 and 'bridle their tongues' of 1.26, where an unbridled tongue means that the person's faith is worthless. **(3) If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. (4) Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet 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 exploits. In each example, something small brings direction to the whole.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. James appears to take a rather pessimistic view of this ‘world of iniquity’. However, the syntax of this verse is difficult – with more than one subject - and some commentators think that the text is corrupt. The passage which includes the phrase ‘a world of iniquity’ may be a gloss. Note the phrase ‘the cycle of nature’ – there is some uncertainty about its meaning but scholars think that the term has a background in Greek philosophy and religion, referring to the ‘circle of existence’ or ‘creation’. Some have even suggested that the term ultimately came from Tibetan Buddhism (through Orphism) and draws on the idea of the wheel of life or becoming. (There is also a speech attributed to the Buddha called the ‘Fire Sermon’ in which he says that ‘the tongue is on fire’). Such ideas are speculative but an exchange of ideas in the ancient world is not impossible. Nevertheless, how do we think about this verse in the light of recent events? In a world dominated by email and social media, words (often in no more than 240 characters) can generate a huge amount of conflict. How do we cultivate the disciplines to stop this happening? **(7) For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, (8) but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. (10) From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.** To bless or to curse? James stresses the duplicity of the tongue in verse 9. This is a commonplace in Greek philosophy (Diogenes: ‘What in people is both good and bad?’ ‘The tongue’). James couches the argument in more theological language. How are we a blessing to others? **(11) Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? (12) Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.** Bede interprets these images in the light of scripture – the fig tree is a symbolic reference to Adam and Eve (Gen 3.7), olives = the fruit of mercy (Psalm 51.10), the grapevine = the fruit of mercy (Psalm 22.5, Romans 5.5): ‘Therefore the fig tree cannot produce olives, because anyone who tries to make excuses for himself in sins rather than accuse himself by no means bestows the works of devotion which are done in propitiation for sin on his neighbours with a perfect heart but rather with a proud one, not is the grapevine able to produce olives, because anyone who perfectly inebriates himself with divine love no longer accuses anyone but himself for his sins’.

2. **Two Kinds of Wisdom (3.13-18)**

(13) Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. (14) But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. James returns to the relationship between words and deeds. There is gentleness, but there is also an implicit rebuke. **(15) Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. (16) For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. (17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (18) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.** Verse 15 has given us the phrase ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’, which is used in the baptismal rite. The passage has often been used in doctrinal controversy, but the point of this passage is that people’s good lives should demonstrate that their works are accomplished with gentleness born of God’s wisdom.

(1) As we contemplate the heat of exchanges on social media and the way we respond to its sometimes intemperate language, what can we learn from James’ epistle?

(2) How do we ‘bridle the tongue’?

(3) What is James saying to you in James 3.13-18? How might we embody the virtues which James commends?