

For we all stumble in many ways. – The connective word “For” (*γὰρ, gar*) indicates that James is now giving the basis for his statement in the previous verse, cautioning those who may be seeking the position of a teacher that they would receive a stricter judgment. Thus he emphasizes why seeking to be a “teacher” must be entered into with due caution. Since the teacher is constantly using words to express or deliver his teaching, the possibility of error is likewise increased. But James does not limit his teaching in this verse just to recognized teachers, for he applies what he is saying to “anyone,” and in v. 8 he writes that “no one can tame the tongue,” thus including all people, not just teachers.

...we all stumble – What is more, James includes himself, for he writes “we all stumble in many ways.” Rather than putting himself forward as having a higher position than others, himself being an apostle and even a brother of Yeshua, and thus as being less susceptible to sin, he includes himself as an equal with all believers who still retain the sinful flesh against which a constant battle must be waged.

We encountered the term “to stumble” (*πταίω, ptaiō*) in 2:10 where it carries the sense of “to sin, transgress.”

For whoever keeps the whole Torah and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (James 2:10)

Here “to stumble” is the opposite of “keeping” the Torah, that is, of obeying what the Torah commands. The verb *ptaiō* is found only two other times in the Apostolic Scriptures, and both of these use the word to describe sinful behavior.

I say then, they [Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. (Rom 11:11)

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; (2Pet 1:10)

But how does this statement of James support his statement in the previous verse, that teachers will receive a stricter judgment? It is that teachers are regularly speaking words and doing so to many more people than those who are not teachers. As such, the sheer multiplicity of their words would put them in the place of more often receiving a greater number of judgments since even some erring in speech is inevitable.

Teachers being men of words *par excellence* are particularly exposed to the danger of sins of speech.¹

James clearly teaches us here against the man-made doctrine of “perfectionism,” i.e., that it is possible for believers to progress in their sanctification to the point where they gain complete holiness and thus never sin again. Indeed, Qohelet states:

Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. (Eccl 7:20)

The phrase “in many *ways*” is actually one word in the Greek (πολύς, *polus*) meaning “many,” (the word “ways” being added in English translations) and most likely describes the fact that “stumbling” in the sense of “to sin” or “to transgress” can happen in many different ways and contexts. But the primary context which James wishes to emphasize is that of speech, the use of the tongue since he is primarily addressing those who are teachers or who desire to become teachers.

If anyone does not stumble in what he says... – Here, again, the term “to stumble” means to err, and thus all are susceptible to err in speech. And this is all the more relevant to teachers who spend a good deal of their life speaking. Thus teachers, by the very nature of their work, are even more vulnerable to making mistakes, either because they have been misinformed and are repeating that which is in error, or simply because they unintentionally are mistaken in what they have taught.

... he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. – The word “perfect” (τέλειος, *teleios*) here does not mean “completely without sin,” as some who hold to “perfectionism” say. Rather, the word has to do with “completeness” and here, “maturity.” While this statement can be applied to all people, in this context James specifically has teachers in mind. A teacher, who is necessarily given to many words, and who is able to less and less “stumble in what he says,” has proven himself to have gained a state of maturity in character which guards him against destructive speech.

Such destructive speech can be either in giving wrong information as though it is true, and thus leading those he is teaching astray, or it can be speech which enters into various forms of gossip or *lashon hara'* (לְשׁוֹן הָרָע), that is, defaming others in his teaching. In the case of

1 S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* quoted from Timothy Luke Johnson, *James in The Anchor Bible NT* (Yale, 1974), p. 256.

wrong information, the teacher himself may not be aware that what he is teaching is in error, because he may simply be repeating what someone taught him without having verified the information he is presenting. But this is not the case with gossip or evil speech. Any teacher who engages in gossip is doing so knowingly. Surely there is a proper way to disagree with something another teacher has presented, but this must not be done in a way that moves into gossip.

The primary point James is making here is this: since stumbling in the use of one's tongue is so easy to do and so prevalent, a person (including a teacher) who seldom errs in what he says has proven himself to have gained true maturity in being able to control his speech, and as such, is seen to be mature in all areas of life. For if one is able to sanctify one's speech, the very area in which error so easily occurs, it is clear that such a person has matured in their ability to obey the Lord in all areas of life. James considers the tongue, "one's speech," therefore to be a kind of "litmus test" of one's overall growth in the Lord.

It seems that James is concerned about destructive speech among those who are aspiring to the role of teacher in the communities of faith. Since that role was held in high esteem, many probably sought it who were not morally qualified. James's point is that to stand before other believers and attempt to teach the truths of God carries a grave responsibility. When such a role, in which the tongue has full vent, combines with unrighteous relational dynamics, destruction ravages a community. Consequently, the role of teacher demands a concurrent commitment to being disciplined in what one says—and this demand is not easily fulfilled.¹

But one might ask: do our words actually have such an impact upon our spiritual condition? Is James perhaps exaggerating the whole issue of the use of one's tongue? It seems as though James anticipates such a question, and thus gives further illustrations to bolster his point in the following context.

1 George H. Guthrie, *James in The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Zondervan, 2006), p. 245.

3–4 Now if¹ we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 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.

In the previous verse James used the illustration of “bridling” (χαλιναγωγῆσαι, *xalinagōgēsai*) a horse to control its movements. Now in v. 3 he shows what a good illustration it is. For the “bit” (χαλινός, *xalinos*) is a small implement but it is able to control the massive weight of the horse so that the animal obeys the one who rides and controls the bit via the reins.

The illustration works for James on several fronts. First, the bit in the horse’s mouth is a small thing, but it controls the whole animal, being a good illustration of the “tongue,” itself a small member of the body, but able to give evidence of one’s whole character and spiritual maturity.

Secondly, the bridle of the horse is controlled by the rider. This gives a good illustration of how the believer must yield to the Spirit in leading and convicting so that one’s life becomes more and more conformed to God’s will rather than giving in to the flesh.

A third aspect of James using the horse and bridle as an illustration of the tongue is that apart from God’s mercy and sovereign grace in saving sinners, a person could be far more akin to a wild horse, which cannot be controlled until tamed. As Manton notes:

...note that men, because of their natural fierceness, are like wild animals. Man aspired to be God but became “like the beasts that perish” (Psalm 49:12). The psalmist says, “Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle” (Psalm 32:9). To keep them from doing harm, men’s tongues must be restrained. We possess a wantonness by which we kick against God’s precepts (see Deuteronomy 32:15). It is by God’s mercy that we are restrained. This natural fierceness is calmed through the control of the tongue.²

The second illustration (in v. 4) that James uses to picture the power

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- 1 On the textual variants, whether the original had εἰ δὲ, ἴδε, or ἰδοῦ, see A. K. M. Adam, *James: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Baylor, 2013), p. 62. It would seem that εἰ δὲ has the greater weight of evidence, but neither option has far-reaching exegetical consequences.
 - 2 Manton, *James*, p. 283.

of the tongue is that of a rudder on a ship. The size of the ship when compared to the size of the rudder is overwhelming. Furthermore, the ship is driven by the power of the strong wind filling its sails and moving it through the waves of the water. And the fact that James uses the picture of the ship being “driven” (ἐλαύνω, *elaunō*) adds to the reality of wind-power and makes the comparison to the rudder even greater.

In this illustration, the primary point to be made is the fact that the pilot moves the rudder in accordance with his desired direction for the ship. Thus, the pilot is the one who is in control. This raises the obvious question for us as we apply the illustration James is giving us: Who controls the tongue of man? The believer has been given a new heart and desire to please God, and when he or she is being led by the Spirit, their lives are increasingly given over to that which honors God. Being led by the Spirit, then, will be evidenced by a life in which the use of the tongue is guided and moved in accordance with the purpose and will of the Ruach.

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!

James now draws an obvious conclusion to the illustrations he has given us so far, and he will give yet another, but he wants to make sure we are following him in the analogies he has given. Even as the bit in the mouth of the horse is small yet controls the powerful animal, and the rudder on the ship is extremely small when compared with the massive ship itself, so the tongue would be considered a small thing when compared to the muscles of the legs, the strength of the torso and the power of the arms to carry out much work. Yet the tongue, like the horse’s bit and the ship’s rudder, can bring about great things or, conversely, cause uncontrollable damage.

...and yet it boasts of great things. – James uses the verb (αὐχέω, *auxeō*), “to boast,” which is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures and is not found at all in the Lxx, but is widely enough attested in Hellenistic literature.¹ This idea that the tongue “boasts of great things” simply means that, like the bit in the horse’s mouth and the rudder of a great ship, the tongue, though a small member of the body, can cause great good as well as great harm. As Vaughan notes:

It can sway men to violence, or it can move them to the noblest actions. It can instruct the ignorant, encourage the dejected,

1 See Timothy Luke Johnson, *James*, p. 258.

comfort the sorrowing, and soothe the dying. Or, it can crush the human spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, and bring nations to the brink of war.¹

...*See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!* – Giving us yet another illustration, James now uses a small flame which envelopes a great forest with a fire that cannot be contained or stopped. We all are aware that even a spark at the wrong time and place can set a whole forest ablaze. Literally millions of acres can be burned up being ignited by merely a spark.

So it is with the tongue when used for slander and gossip. What one person begins can never be contained, for those who hear the *lashon hara'* may tell it to another, and that one to another, and the damage spreads like wild fire. What is more, it can never be contained for the damage that is done can never be undone. One only has to view the devastation of a forest fire when all has been turned to charcoal and ashes, to appreciate the point James is making.

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.

Now, viewing the tongue as the fire that devastates a forest, James describes the tongue when used as the instrument of slander and gossip, and does so by labeling it “the very world of iniquity” (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας) or “the world of unrighteousness.” The reason the NASB rightly adds the word “very,” i.e., the “very world of iniquity,” is because the Greek has the definite article with the word “iniquity,” thus “the world of the iniquity.” It seems very likely that when James speaks of “the iniquity” or “the unrighteousness,” he may be describing slander or gossip as the primary destructive action of the uncontrolled tongue. Thus, the “world of iniquity” is what James has already described to be that which the believer must guard against, resist, and gain victory over. Interestingly, in 1:27 James uses the Greek word ἄσπιλος (*aspilos*) translated “unstained.”

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained (*aspilos*) by the world. (James 1:27)

1 Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide* (Zondervan, 1969), p. 69.

Now, in 3:6, he uses the verb of the same root when he writes:

the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles (σπιλώω, *spilōō*) the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (James 3:6)

Similar language used in our text is also found in James 4:4. For in our text (3:6) “the tongue is set (καθίστημι, *kathistēmi*) among our members as that which defiles the entire body.” In James 4:4 the same verb, “to set” is used: “Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world sets himself (καθίστημι, *kathistēmi*) as an enemy of God.” That James is using the same verbal components between these two texts may well indicate that when, in our verse (3:6) he speaks of “the very world of iniquity,” he is teaching us that if we engage in slander and gossip, we are acting as though we are one with the “world,” that is, that which is totally contrary to God’s righteousness. The use of the tongue to slander and gossip is therefore to appear as defining oneself as part of the “world” and thus as an enemy of God.

John teaches us:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1Jn 2:15)

This is what James means when he writes that when the tongue is used for evil, it “defiles the entire body.” It appears to others as though the slanderer is participating in that which characterizes the world.

...and sets on fire the course of our life – Now James returns to his illustration of the spark and small fire that consumes an entire forest. If slander and gossip become a regular practice in a person’s life, it not only will inevitably consume one’s life if allowed to remain, but will also determine the course of one’s life. Even as the swift current of a raging river will determine the direction of someone in a small craft, so the habit of engaging in slander and gossip, unless repented of which would initiate an obvious change, will control the path of one’s life.

Indeed, the Greek translated as “course of our life” is literally “the wheel of *our* life” (τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως), which emphasizes that, like a wheel, when it begins to roll is not easily immediately stopped. The consequences of misusing the tongue may have long-term devastating effects in one’s life and in others affected by such misuse.

...and is set on fire by hell. – The word translated “hell” is γέεννα (*gehenna*), the large ravine south of Jerusalem. Its association with burning

was twofold. First, the Tanach teaches us that this region was used for pagan sacrifices by fire to Molech, including human sacrifice (2Ki 23:10; Jer 7:31). Secondly, it was the refuse dump for Jerusalem in which the garbage was continually being burned. By the time of the Apostolic Scriptures, the name *Gehenna* was used to describe the eschatological place of eternal, fiery punishment and corruption.

Thus, when James writes that such ungodly use of the tongue is “set on fire by hell,” he teaches us that the enemy of our souls, the great deceiver himself, is even the one who encourages such *lashon hara’* because he knows the utter devastation that can result from it. If, by the true work of the Spirit within us who are believers, we truly desire to love and worship the God Who saved us, dedicating ourselves to be His witnesses upon this earth and to extol the glories of our Savior Yeshua, then we must give no place for the enemy in our lives. That James has clearly taught us that the evil use of the tongue is spawned and encourage by the Devil himself, we ought to hate evil speech and commit ourselves constantly to guard against it, being diligent not to engage in slander or gossip, nor to listen to such talk when initiated by others.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be
acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.
(Ps 19:14)

7–8 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

The opening “For” (*γάρ, gar*) connects verses 8 and 9 to the previous context by emphasizing how James has characterized the tongue, namely, that apart from God’s enabling, it is uncontrollable, even as a raging forest fire is unable to be controlled. He does this by way of comparison to how mankind has controlled all manner of animals in the world. This harkens back to the sovereign plan of God in creating mankind and the command given to Adam and Chavah. In Gen 1:26 and we hear the decree of God in creating mankind, and in Gen 9:2, the divine order give to Adam and Chavah as representatives of mankind.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea