

Epistle of Ya'akov ¹ ~ 3:1-12

Taming the Tongue

These verses can be taken in three ways: addressing topics related to teachers in the **Messianic** community, as instruction generally applicable to all **Believers**, or as instruction applicable to both groups in some sense. In these verses, **Ya'akov** addresses issues related to the dangers of speech.

Ya'akov echoes **Yeshua's** emphasis on the crucial importance of the use of words in daily life (Matt. 12:36; Mark 7:20–23). From his discourse on idle faith, **Ya'akov** proceeded to discuss idle speech. The failure to bridle the tongue mentioned earlier (1:26) is now expanded. As disturbing as those who have faith with no works are those **Messianics** who substitute words for works. One's tongue should be controlled. Small though it is, the tongue is powerful and all too prone to perversion and pollution.

Teachers were particularly vulnerable to errors of speech.

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For other teachers of the **Word** and me, this is one of the scariest verses in the **Word of God**. Pray for us who do and for discernment for you that they rightly preach **God's Word**.

² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Here, **Ya'akov** utilizes three images to illustrate that a small thing, like the tongue, can have far-reaching effects. He uses a horse's bit (v. 3) and a ship's rudder (v. 4) to convey that those who have control over their tongues have control over themselves. He also uses the image of fire (v.6) to convey that the tongue has great potential for destruction and harm.

Others also compared the spread of rumors to the igniting of what would rapidly become a forest fire. Here the image is that of a tongue that incites the whole body to violence. The boastful tongue plotting harm (Ps 52:1–4) and the tongue as a hostile fire (Ps 39:1–3; 120:2–4; Prov 16:27; 26:21; Eccles 28:21–23) are old images. The fire is sparked by "hell" suggests where it leads; **Jewish** pictures of **Gehenna**, like **Yeshua's** images for the fate of the damned, typically included flame.

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,

Every kind beast and bird... Being compared to the elements or creatures of nature would have been particularly degrading to **Ya'akov's** audience. **Jewish** writers often use this comparison to dehumanize and emphasize less-than-human behaviors.

⁸, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

¹ I assume by now that you know that James Hebrew name is Ya'akov.

The tongue ... is a restless evil. The **Hebrew** phrase refers to gossiping, backbiting, rumormongering, slander, and other misuses of speech. The **Talmud** condemns it severely: it is weighed equally with the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. These three sins named are those for which, according to the **Talmud, Jew** is supposed to give up his life rather than commit. ²

⁹ *With it, we bless our Lord and Father, and with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*

It is both hypocrisy and folly to **bless God** during a worship service and then, after the service, to **curse** someone made in God's image (see Gen. 1:26–27). If the **curse** implies the common practice of invoking the name of **God** against the person, then this is doubly heinous.

¹⁰ *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.*

¹¹ *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and saltwater?*

Fresh and saltwater ... a tongue that dishonors **God** is not compatible with the speech that honors Him.

¹² *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.* ~ Ya'akov 3:1-12 (CJB)

A fig tree ... bear olives? It is against a tree's nature to produce two kinds of fruit. ³ Similarly, a **Believer's** mouth is not intended for both evil and good speech.

We will learn more from **Ya'akov** as we dig into what he says about **Wisdom from Above**.

² Stern, D. H. (1996). **Jewish New Testament Commentary**.

³ Well, that statement may get me into trouble with my gardening or farming friends. That's why I emphasized "nature."