

## James

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James 3:5c-12

Vss. 5c-6

- Forest fires and wildfires were something the people of Palestine were all too familiar with. Much like parts of California, in the dry season the grass and scrub become dry as tinder and a careless flame, no matter how small, can set off an uncontrollable fire. You see this in Psalms 83:13-14 and Isaiah 9:18.
- You also find the metaphor of the tongue being like fire in Proverbs 16:27.
- The two big similarities are that like a wildfire the damage the tongue can cause is wide-ranging. You see this today in the media's Cancel Culture environment. Comments that people made decades ago are now coming back to end their careers. William Barclay points out that "the Jewish Rabbis had this picture: 'Life and death are in the hand of the tongue.' Has the tongue a hand? No, but as the hand kills, so the tongue. The hand kills only at close quarters; the tongue is called an arrow because it kills at a distance. An arrow kills at forty or fifty paces, but of the tongue it is said (Psalm 73:9), 'They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.' It ranges over the whole earth and reaches to heaven." A boxer may block a punch. A fencer may parry a sword thrust. But there is nothing that can be done to defend against the tongue even at great distance or over great stretches of time. Second, it is uncontrollable. There is an old saying that says, "Three things come not back--the spent arrow, the spoken word and the lost opportunity." Once a word is out there, it is impossible to get it back. It is almost impossible to kill a rumor and an idle word can be as deadly as any poison. Kids today are literally dying because of verbal bullying on social media.
- One of the key things that should make it "obvious", as 1 John puts it, that we as Christians are different than the rest of the world is how we use and control our tongues.
- When vs. 6 says that "the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity", James is suggesting that in our bodies the tongue stands for the whole wicked world. When the Greek word "kosmos" is used in the context that it's used for here, it suggests a world without God, a world hostile to the very name of God, a world that out of ignorance of the nature of God, is hostile to Him and His Kingdom. An uncontrolled tongue is like a world in rebellion against God.

- What the NASB translates as “the course of our life” literally means the “wheel of our life”. The ancients often saw life as a wheel: round, complete, whole. But they also saw the wheel as always moving forward, but at the same time cyclical. What James is saying is that the tongue can kindle a destructive fire which can destroy all life, the very pathways of life. Such a fire has only one source it is kindled with, the very fire of hell. Here indeed is its terror.

#### Vss. 7-8

- The process of taming the animals is common in the Old Testament. You see it in the Creation story where in Genesis 1:28 God tells Adam to rule over the animals of the earth and then the Lord reiterates the point to Noah in Genesis 9:2. This is celebrated in Psalms 8:6-8. So while humans have tamed the mighty elephant and snake charmers even control deadly serpents, no one has yet controlled the tiny, yet deadly and powerful, human tongue.

#### Vss. 9-12

- Here James is speaking to humanity’s split nature, one part angel and the other part demon. Nowhere, James is suggesting, is this more evident than in the human tongue.
- This was an especially relevant concept to a Jew. Whenever the name of God was mentioned, a Jew was to respond: "Blessed be He!" Three times a day the devout Jew had to repeat the Shemoneh Esreh, the famous eighteen prayers called Eulogies, every one of which begins, "Blessed be thou, O God." Yet with the same tongue that blesses God so freely, so too is our neighbor cursed.
- To James this is the unnatural consequence of sin. How can a fountain spew out both bad water and good? How can a tree produce both good fruit and bad? And how can the same mouth that blesses God, curse those who are His creation and children?
- In “Pilgrim’s Progress”, John Bunyan introduces us to Talkative: "He was a saint abroad and a devil at home." So many like this person bring shame on the name of Jesus: speaking with the voice of an angel at church on Sunday, swearing to peel the paint off the wall at home; teaching the stories of the Bible on Sunday and then telling stories that would make a bartender blush on Saturday night.
- The tongue can build you up or tear you down. The tongue can wound or heal. James is saying that for the Christian such a dichotomy should not exist. It is the duty and very nature of a disciple to speak every word as if God were the only audience.