

LESSON 5

A BIT, A RUDDER AND A FIRE

James 3:1-12; Proverbs 18:21

JAMES 3:1-12

Reading before class: James 3.

For four weeks we have been talking about what our hands do. Now we move about eighteen inches up.

1. I asked you to count the pictures in James 3:1-12 before class. Write your number here, and do not change it after you hear somebody else's.

My number: _____

2. In your own words, why would God give us a whole paragraph of pictures about the tongue instead of just a list of rules for it? We will come back to this.

FIRST, WHO IS BEING WARNED

3. Read James 3:1. Who does James start with, and what does he say they incur?

-
4. Read James 3:2. James says something about all of us and then something about one particular man. Write both.

About all of us: _____

About the man who does not stumble in speech: _____

5. Look at that second half again. James makes the tongue the test of something. The test of what?

TWO PICTURES THAT STEER

6. Read James 3:3. What goes in the horse's mouth, and what does it end up directing?

7. Read James 3:4. Write down three things James says about the ships, and then write what actually turns them.

8. Both pictures make the same point. Say it in one sentence.

9. Now look at the end of verse 4 for the part that is easy to run past. The rudder goes wherever whose inclination desires?

10. So a rudder is not the one deciding anything. What does that add to the picture that the bit alone does not give you?

THE PICTURE THAT TURNS ON YOU

11. Read James 3:5. James keeps the small-thing-big-result idea going but he changes what the small thing is doing. What is it doing now?

12. Read James 3:6 slowly. It is a heavy verse. Write down the four things James says the tongue is or does.

13. A bit and a rudder are held by somebody. Is a forest fire? What has James just done to his own illustration?

14. Read the last five words of verse 6. Where does James say that fire gets lit?

15. In your opinion, why does James put the steering pictures first and the fire picture second? What would be lost if he flipped them?

THE ONE THAT WILL NOT BE TAMED

16. Read James 3:7. Make a list of what mankind has managed to tame.

17. Read James 3:8. Write the sentence James puts against that list.

18. He gives the tongue two descriptions in that same verse. Write both, and note that neither one of them is about volume.

19. Here is a hard one and we will take it up in class. If no one can tame it, then what exactly is James asking us to do?

OUT OF THE SAME MOUTH

20. Read James 3:9. Two things come out of the same mouth. Name both.

21. Look at how James describes the men being cursed. What does he say about them, and why does he mention that here of all places?

22. Read James 3:10. Write out James's own verdict, word for word. It is short.

23. Notice he does not say these things ought not to happen so often. What does he actually say, and what does that do to the idea of a Christian who is mostly careful with his mouth?

TWO PICTURES ABOUT WHERE IT COMES FROM

24. Read James 3:11. What cannot a fountain do?

25. Read James 3:12. Write the two questions James asks and the one flat statement he ends on.

26. These last two pictures are not about control at all. What are they about? Look at what a spring and a tree both have that a bit and a rudder do not.

27. Put it together. If the mouth is a spring, then a man with a mouth problem has a problem where?

LET'S SUMMARIZE HERE

- 1.** The bit and the rudder say a small thing steers a large one.
- 2.** The fire says the same small thing destroys, and nobody is holding it.
- 3.** The beast says you cannot tame it by trying harder.
- 4.** The spring and the tree say what comes out tells you what is down in there.
- 5.** Therefore this chapter is not finally about the tongue at all. It is about the man the tongue belongs to.

DRAW THEM

- 28.** In the space below, draw all six pictures. They can be terrible drawings. Under each one write the verse number and, in three words or less, what it teaches.

THE PROVERB UNDERNEATH ALL OF IT

- 29.** Read Proverbs 18:21. What two things does Solomon say are in the power of the tongue?

- 30.** Note that he does not say the tongue has power to hurt or help. He uses bigger words than that. Do you think he is exaggerating? Give your reasons.

WORD STUDY · BRIDLE (JAMES 3:2) AND BIT (JAMES 3:3)

These two words are not merely related. One of them contains the other.

Verse 2 calls the man who does not stumble in speech able to bridle the whole body. That verb is a compound word, and Liddell et al., the standard dictionary of ancient Greek, gives "guide with, as with bit and bridle." Strong glosses it "bit-leader." And Swanson puts the plain meaning on it: "exercise self-control."

Verse 3 then puts bits into horses' mouths. That noun is the bit half of the verb from verse 2, now standing on its own.

And here is the part worth seeing. The dictionary definition of the verse 2 verb says it means to curb something, "conceived of as placing a bridle on something (like a horse) so as to control it." So the horse is not an illustration James went hunting for. It was already inside the word he used one sentence earlier.

And what a bit actually is: a piece of metal, perhaps iron, held in a horse's mouth by the reins and used to steer the animal while a man rides it.

Source: Logos, 4 Aug. 2026. James 3:2, χαλιναγωγέω, "bridle; hold in check," sense to curb, "conceived of as placing a bridle on something (like a horse) so as to control it"; James 3:3, χαλινός, "bit; bridle." Lexicons consulted: Liddell et al.; Swanson; Strong. Full entries in Works Cited.

And note this: you can see the whole point in English without any of that. Bridle in verse 2, bits in verse 3, one sentence apart.

BUT SOMEONE MAY ASK...

"If verse 8 says no one can tame the tongue, then why is this chapter here? Am I being commanded to do something impossible?"

That is the right question to ask of this chapter and I would rather a person ask it than sit there confused. Notice exactly what verse 8 says and what it does not. It says no one can tame it. It is a statement about what a man can accomplish by his own effort, and it is right after seven verses about what mankind HAS tamed. James has been building that contrast on purpose. The verse is aimed at your confidence, not at your responsibility.

Now notice where James does not stop. He does not end the chapter at verse 12. Read on into verses 13 through 18 this week and see what he introduces the moment the tongue has been declared untamable. It is not a technique.

And remember what James already told this same congregation back in chapter 1: that God gives wisdom generously to the man who asks, and that the word implanted is able to save souls.

So the honest answer is that verse 8 kills one hope in order to point you at a better one. The man who reads verse 8 and concludes he is off the hook has read one verse and quit. The man who reads it and quits trying in his own strength has read it right.

FOR YOUR LIFE

31. Look back at your answer to question 2. Would you change it now? What changed?

32. Verse 6 says the tongue defiles the entire body. Think of a time when something you said changed the way you felt about yourself for the rest of the day. Which came first, the feeling or the words?

33. Verse 9 puts blessing and cursing in the same mouth. Be honest. How many hours pass between the two in your week?

- 34.** In your opinion, which is more common among us: people who say cruel things, or people who say true things cruelly?
-

THIS WEEK

- 35.** Verse 4 says the rudder goes where the pilot's inclination desires. Name one thing you want badly enough right now that it is steering how you talk.
-

- 36.** Write down one conversation you are likely to have this week where that will show up, and what you will do differently.
-

Bring this workbook back next week. We are going to spend all of next Sunday on one word.

NEXT WEEK. Lesson 6: On the Receiving End.

Read before class: Colossians 4 and Ephesians 4.

One thing to watch for: Ephesians 4:29 tells you to stop saying one kind of thing and start saying another. Find the standard Paul gives for the second kind. It is not "be positive." It is a great deal more demanding than that.