

JAMES 3:1-14 | KINGDOM TEACHERS (AND THEIR STUDENTS)

VERSE 1 –

In verse 1 James begins a topic of teachers, especially those Jewish teachers during the Kingdom offer. James will sidetrack in verses 2-12 and return to the topic of teachers in vv. 13-14.

The word **masters** is used in its sense as *teacher*. James discourages teaching because those who do such **shall receive the greater condemnation**. The word **condemnation** is simply “judgment,” and could be lesser or **greater**.

It is interesting that James does not say that teachers *might receive the greater condemnation*, but that they **shall receive**. I could find no instance in which the Greek word κρίμα [krima] was used in a positive sense.

The Christian community has exclusively assumed the **greater condemnation** comes from God at the judgment day. But could it be that James is warning against being a teacher because those who try to teach the Jewish nation will **receive the greater condemnation**?

VERSE 2 –

In verse 1 James spoke of **we** in reference to **masters**. Now, however, he changes the reference of **we** to **all**. Because James was speaking about teachers, the thought of speech came to mind, and he spends vv. 2-12 on this thought.

Grammatically, it is important to read as *we all offend*, not as “we offend everyone.” While English allows for either reading, Greek only allows **all** to be the subject, and not the object.

The word **offend** has an obsolete usage of “To strike (one's foot) against something”.<sup>1</sup> While some may want to change to a less archaic word, doing so is problematic. Many of the modern translations go with *stumble*, yet this word is, by nature, a passive word. One should not use a passive verb when the original calls for an active verb.

It is easy to “trip over a word.” Clearly James speaks figuratively (for how else could it be taken?).

The grammar is again insightful when it speaks of the **perfect man** as one who **offend not in word**. This is not talking about one who does not *offend others*, but rather about *one who gets his words right*. For the same usage of the word, compare James 2:10, where the author speaks about one who might **offend in one point** of the Law.

This brings an entirely new light on this passage. James is not teaching that “we should not be offensive,” but rather that “we should become a master of words.”

The man who is able to understand and use words to perfection is one who is **able also to bridle the whole body**. Notice that James does not say this man *does bridle the whole body*, but rather that he is **able** to do so.

All great societies have recognized that *words* are the greatest tools and weapons ever known to man. Great societies train wordsmiths, encourage proper word usage, and spend countless hours improving a phrase.

Ironically, these *words about the proper usage of words* are virtually never interpreted in this light. Almost always they are interpreted to mean “the person who has learned not to offend others with their speech is a **perfect man**.”

<sup>1</sup> "offend, v." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2022. Web. 11 August 2022

### VERSE 3 –

James gives two illustrations to highlight his contention that *perfection in the use of words* is the skill needed to be able to **bridle the whole body** (v. 2).

His first illustration is in verse 3. A massive horse can be made to **obey us** so that **we turn about their whole body** with the use of **bits in the horses' mouths**. The illustration, of course, highlights the importance of *the mouth* in the whole body.

In fact, not only is spiritual self-control developed from the control of the tongue, but well-studied physicians now know that the vast majority of cancers, heart disease, strokes, immune disorders, intestinal maladies, and even common colds and virus-related illnesses are sourced in *problems in the mouth*. In truth, a healthy mouth is the body's greatest indicator of a healthy life.

Whether James knew this to be true physically, he certainly knew it to be true spiritually.

### VERSE 4 –

James gives his second illustration in verse 4, using the **very small helm** of a ship to turn the large vessel **whithersoever the governor listeth**.

The **helm** of a ship, in modern terminology, is the ship's wheel that controls the rudder. This usage, however, did not come about until the 18th Century. In earlier terminology the word was used of the entire steering mechanism, which typically was a paddle or oar with a handle.

Once again, the illustration is certainly that it is the small that controls the big.

### VERSE 5 –

James summarizes his two illustrations in verse 5. He brings a third illustration, which continues in verse 6, of **how great a matter a little fire kindleth!**

### VERSE 6 –

Now speaking of fire, James says that **the tongue is a fire**. I would suggest dropping the proposed verb *is* and understanding the verse this way: *And the 'tongue fire,' a world of iniquity.* That is, when a *tongue fire* begins, **how great a matter a little fire kindleth!** (v. 5). Indeed, the **fire of hell** leaps into our words at times.

### VERSE 7 –

James now comes to a fourth illustration, that of the taming of wild creatures, all of which have been tamed to some degree. The Greek word translated **tamed** is in reference to *restraining*, not *domesticating*.

### VERSE 8 –

James *may* be saying that it is impossible for any individual to tame his or her own tongue. However, this seems unlikely in the context. Rather, the verse is probably meant to say that, while we can tame the animal world, no man is able to *tame the world of the tongue* in a broad sense. Neither governments nor churches can fully control speech.

And, in truth, the tongue, set free with no restraint, can be **an unruly evil, full of deadly poison**.

## VERSES 9-10 –

The *untamed tongue* is a source of blessing and of cursing, and often in a way that *curses the same thing it blesses*. James is forthright when he says, **My brethren, these things ought not so to be** (v. 10).

## VERSES 11-12 –

Building on the previous illustration, James speaks of a fountain with **sweet water and bitter** (v. 11) and a **fig tree with olive berries** (v. 12). Such would be an anomaly of nature and should be just as rare in our speech.

## VERSE 13 –

Coming back more directly to the discussion of **masters** (v. 1), he instructs such (and, more generally, any who is a **wise man and endued with knowledge**) to *teach with their lives even more than with their words*. The **conversation** is the *comings and goings in life* (from the Greek ἀναστροφή [anastrophe], lit. *again to turn*). In doing so, James comes again to a man's **works**.