

A violent thunderstorm is not your average kite flying weather. But neither was Benjamin Franklin* your average kite flyer. On a stormy night in 1752 the spectacled inventor ventured outside with a makeshift kite, a trusty ball of string, and his house key. Whereas kite flying is typically associated with children and picnics, this was definitely no picnic for old Ben Franklin—who thought like Albert Einstein but acted like Evel Knievel. He was out to test a highly controversial theory, soon to be called the Philadelphia Experiments. He believed that lightning was simply a discharge of electricity, a lot of it! Today we know he was right.

Lightning bolts can measure up to 90 miles long. And although they’re only five to six inches at the core, each bolt literally burns a 15-foot-wide electrified area around its core to about 54,000 degrees Fahrenheit—several times hotter than the surface of the sun. Lightning—and its one billion volts of energy—travels at 60,000 miles per second. It’s not uncommon for a single bolt to have as many as 40 discharges simultaneously. It’s one of nature’s most dramatic and dangerous light shows. It is impossible to know exactly, but it is estimated that worldwide there are approximately 24,000 fatalities with ten times as many injuries annually due to lighting.

Lightning’s awesome power is no toy, as Ben found out in another experiment. He was curious to know the effects of lightning on a full-grown turkey. So, an unsuspecting bird was found and secured to a poorly designed lightning rod. Sure enough, as a lightning bolt struck the rod and sent its supercharged current down the faulty cable, a wayward spark was launched and badly burned the elder statesman. Less fortunate was the turkey; it was incinerated.

Perhaps his experiments were the reason Mr. Franklin established America’s first Fire Department, as well as the world’s first Fire Insurance Company. The connection between the two is uncanny. No doubt, Ben’s half-charred albeit well-insured laboratory was a familiar stop for the Philadelphia bucket brigade.

Franklin was ahead of his time, to be sure. **But my question for today is this: Which is more difficult to tame, electricity or the human tongue?**

According to James, “*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed...but no human being can tame the tongue*” (vv. 7-8). It is humanly *impossible*. James shares a somewhat disjointed discourse on the problem of taming the tongue. However, it is possible to organize his teaching into a few specific points which helps us admit “*we all stumble*” yet still understand we can be used by God.

The first point is: “*Not many of you should become teachers*” (v. 1) James issues a cautionary warning to potential Sunday School teachers. I guess James didn’t get the memo that **today** our congregation is launching our fall Sunday School classes for children, youth, and adults. Thanks a lot James! I know of no other Scripture so laser focused on the enormous responsibility of teaching Gospel truth—**which is why I was shaking in my shoes** as a 2nd year seminary student when I was asked to teach the Confirmation Class at 1st Presbyterian Church in Metuchen, NJ. Teachers in the N.T. possessed one of the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit, one of five leadership gifts given by the Lord to the church. Therefore, we should become involved in teaching when we are called by God and gifted by the Holy Spirit to do that work. We do need good teachers in our church, so let us pray for God to equip our teachers with every gift they will need. Teachers should faithfully do what God has called them to do. Teaching is an amazing privilege but also an awesome responsibility!

The second point is: “*We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect*” (v. 2). The word James uses for *stumble* means “to slip up.” British naval hero Lord Fisher, said that “Life is strewn with orange peels.” He knew that “slipping up” is what we humans do. “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,*” says the apostle John in 1st John 1:8. Even pagan writers believed this very same thing about sin. Thucydides said, “It is the nature of man to sin both in private and in public life.” The Stoic philosopher Seneca once said, “We all sin, some more grievously, some more lightly” (*On Clemency 1:6*).

James then makes a hypothetical statement that could potentially confuse us. He states that if a person could tame their tongue, or bring it under control, such a person would be *perfect*. His hypothetical seems to contradict his contention only a few verses later where he states, “*But no human being can tame the tongue*” (v. 8). Is there a contradiction? James draws us back to God once again. His overwhelming evidence regarding the wickedness and destructiveness of our tongues establishes the fact that we are helpless in the human realm. But we have great hope and potential in the spiritual realm. The problem with our tongues is a spiritual problem. They have been under the control of our sinful nature and Satan has taken control of the tongues of every human being. But you will recall that James also says that God is the source of every good gift and he is available to help us in every situation. That is such good news because here James says there is no one in this world who is perfect and therefore, no one who does not sin in some way. Which brings us to the third point James makes after telling the truth that *we all stumble*.

His third point that I’ve already mentioned is the hardest pill to swallow: “*No one can tame the human tongue*” (v. 8). James couldn’t say it more plainly. In fact, his statement is so clear that we face the possibility of misinterpreting James’ teaching if we conclude that he is **fatalistic** about the possibility of taming the tongue. **To the contrary, he is simply attempting to establish the impossibility of taming the tongue by mere human effort.** To reinforce this, James makes more specific contentions regarding the tongue.

The tongue is a little thing but “*makes great boasts*” (v. 5). To illustrate this, James uses three practical examples which his readers would fully understand. **First**, he refers to a bit in the mouth of horses. Although very small, the bit is very significant. By using the bit, the horse will turn whatever direction we wish. **Second**, there is the example of the rudder of a ship. It, too, is very small in comparison to the size of a large ship. But it also has great significance. By using the rudder, the pilot turns a ship where he wants it to go. **Third**, there is a very small spark that can ignite a huge forest fire. What incredible power and significance belong to all three of these very small things.

James says the tongue is a fire: “a world of evil among the parts of the body” in verse 6. The word for evil is *adikia* in Greek, a very strong word meaning the antithesis of righteousness. It is the same word used by Paul when he states in 2nd Timothy, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from (*adikia*, that is) wickedness” (2:19).

He also says of the tongue: “It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6). As a world of evil, the tongue cannot be kept in isolation. It corrupts the entire body. Just as a rudder affects a ship and a bit affects a horse, so the tongue affects the body and spreads corruption. In other words, the tongue does not merely affect the physical body of a person, it brings corruption to our total life. It affects not only what we do, but what we *are*. And the source of this fire is hell itself. Once again James advances his basic contention that all evil comes from the devil. He is the source of the evil that plagues our speech. No wonder we cannot control the tongue. By our own strength, we are incapable of overcoming evil. To control our tongue, we would have to be perfect people!

In verse 8 he says the tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Now the apostle levels his strongest attack of all on the evilness of the tongue. It is not only evil; it is a *restless evil*. It is the kind of evil that is not passive but is actively on the attack. And it is a *deadly poison*. If you have never personally experienced someone with a poisonous tongue, it may be hard for you to relate to. But trust me when I say that it happens; even with so-called Christian people. The significance and influence of the tongue is much greater than its small size would indicate.

This leads to only one conclusion: No one can control the tongue! Human beings can tame almost everything else in all of creation including every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and creature of the sea—even *lightning*! Blessings should flow from our mouths—not cursing. Just wondering: Did you ever curse a political candidate? Mmm? We have all been created in God’s image to bring glory to him. Yet, because of sin, we are a strange mixture of good and evil. And our tongues often betray us by expressing both blessing and cursing.

The first two contentions of James regarding the tongue are crystal clear—the tongue is evil and corrupt. It’s election season in the United States, James. You don’t really need to remind any of us of that. But in today’s Scripture there is a third contention that comes by inference. It is related to all the teachings James has shared up to this point in his letter. Here’s an explanation of how I have reasoned and reached this conclusion:

God is perfect—he alone can control our tongues. *“Every good and perfect gift comes from above”* (1:16-18). Only a perfect person could control their tongue (3:2). Such a person would not only control their tongue but also their total being. Since God is the only One who is perfect, God is the only One who can control *our* tongues. **Our deepest need is to be filled with the Holy Spirit so God can forgive all our sin and enable us by his grace and mercy to control our tongues—and subsequently the rest of our lives.**

Benjamin Franklin was a hero as a leader of the American Revolution and his Philadelphia Experiments were groundbreaking; admirable. But the challenge we have from James is to live by faith and wisdom, and a willingness to surrender to God’s guiding Spirit. When we do that, we will also have incredibly good news to share. **In much the same way as the apostles, we have the impossible task of giving people words they don’t want to hear, about a love they do not deserve, from a God they don’t want to believe.** Is it any wonder most pastors avoid passages like James chapter three!?!

Letting God tame our tongue is a lot more complicated than flying a kite. Any strong breeze will move a kite, **but only God can change the human heart.** Today lightning will strike somewhere on the earth 100 times every second. Today somewhere on the earth the Holy Spirit will strike human hearts to make them aware of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ. Every one of those people that God touches could use an innovative and daring inventor to teach them the wonders of knowing and serving God. That’s where we come in. **We all stumble!** But amazingly God can tame our tongues to use for his purpose and for his glory! Amen.

*The Ben Franklin illustration is borrowed from Ron Walters, Salem Media Group