Who is the audience of the Letter of James? I hope at this point I have weaned you off the idea that James is just a “book” of the Bible, and led you to a recognition that this piece of ancient literature is a letter. Letters have authors. Letters have an atmosphere, or a situation into which they are written. Letters have an audience. So who is the audience of this letter?

James began his letter with the answer . . . “To the 12 tribes in the Dispersion.”

The 12 tribes are simple. These are Jewish people, specifically Jewish believers in Christ. In the “Dispersion” broadens the audience. The “Dispersion” is not one place. It is the lack of a place. The letter is written to the Jewish people living wherever they found refuge, likely those who had found refuge fleeing from the persecution Jesus had promised to those who would claim His name.

And James, the brother of Jesus the Christ, wanted his fellow believing Jews to live the life His brother had described. Note how James begins some of his thoughts . . .

“If anyone thinks he is religious . . .”

“ . . . as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture . . .”

These are good folks! James is not writing anything like Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Those people had issues! James is not calling for repentance as much as he is calling for reform. It is subtle. It is tedious. It is a pursuit of perfection.

It seems that James had a moment as he was writing this letter that he wanted to address the issue of words . . .

“If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, then his religion is useless and he deceives himself.”

So let us begin by analyzing when we use words, when we interact with people utilizing words, and even when we ponder words within our own mind. The obvious answer is when we speak to one another, but even those moments can be broken up into the relationship dynamics: child/parent, husband/wife, employer/employee, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, etc. Beyond speech, consider how we utilize words in emails, texts, social media posts. Finally, how do unspoken words affect us? Women are said to speak three times as many words as men, but I wonder how many words a man thinks that he never communicates. Those words are not benign. They can construct and destruct as easily as words that are spoken.

In the text of the letter, we see James getting distracted from his point about the worthlessness of being unable to “control the tongue” by his great love for caring for orphans and widows. Furthermore, he calls out his church-going friends for their divergent treatment of the rich and the poor. But he makes his way back with a dire warning . . .

“Not many should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment,for we all stumble in many ways.”

When you consider the context of the warning, you see that James is singling out a role that relies completely on words. As a teacher, you speak. As a teacher, you utilize written words. Anyone who has taught long enough has said something they regret. You are going to misspeak. You are going to say something inaccurate or offensive. It is just going to happen. So James seems to be speaking to those angling for the next teaching assignment . . . be careful what you wish for!

Why? Because teachers will receive a stricter, greater judgment. Note how God spoke of the “teachers” (often referred to as “shepherds”) in the Old Testament . . .

“For the shepherds are stupid: they don’t seek the Lord. Therefore they have not prospered, and their whole flock is scattered.”

“You have scattered My flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I will attend to you because of your evil acts.”

“My people are lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, guiding them the wrong way in the mountains.”

“As I live because My flock has become prey and food for every wild animal since they lack a shepherd, for My shepherds do not search for My flock, and because the shepherds feed themselves rather than My flock.”

How many people have been turned away from God because of the influence of a worthless “shepherd”? How many teachers have taken liberties with the Scriptures and turned them to their own advantage? How many false and misleading doctrines have been espoused by individuals eager to use their words.

Be careful what you ask for!

Now James hones in on the idea of stumbling in our words . . .

“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man who is also able to control his whole body.”

James has already alluded to the fact that we will all stumble in “many ways”, but consider how often our stumbling is a result of our words. The mute man is not exempt from stumbling, but consider the profound lack of tools he possesses by which he might sin. Is it any wonder that monks and nuns often take a vow of silence? I have a friend who has developed a medical condition from the sheer amount of stress he has put on his voice from coaching and teaching. The doctors have demanded that he speak only when absolutely necessary, and he remarked to me how many sins he has bypassed since his diagnosis.

James seems to be telling his audience that if you can control your words, the rest of the game is easy . . . that you will be a “perfect” (literally, “finished, completed”) man. I am starting to see his point.

Note how James depicts the tongue in relation to other objects: a bit in a horse’s mouth, a rudder on a large ship, and a spark that leads to a forest fire. Though a horse may weigh several hundred pounds, a two-pound piece of metal causes him to obey his master. Though a shipping vessel may carry tons of cargo and crew, it is steered by a small board in the stern. As for the forest fire, James is actually posing a rhetorical question in his letter, “What size of a spark produces what size forest fire?” The obvious answer is the spark is miniscule compared to the potential of the fire.

Is our little tongue that consequential in our lives? Is it really more important than the physiological greatness of our hands and feet? Can it really outmaneuver the sheer magnitude of the human brain? Absolutely . . .

“And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among the parts of our bodies. It pollutes the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is set on fire by hell . . . It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

So why in the world would God allow something so vile to live with in His creatures?

“We praise our Lord and Father with it . . .”

Though our tongues possess the power to inflict so much evil (the Greek word “kakos”), it also possesses the power to impart so much praise. What is it going to take to break the hold that sin has over our words? What must we do to recapture control of the bit, the rudder? What is it that will wrest away the fires of hell from its sway over my words?

It is praise.

So may we remind ourselves often of why we feel the desire to praise our Lord and Father. May we renew our minds with the beauty of the created order. May we refresh our souls with the beauty of the words, “God so loved the world.” May we find ourselves contemplating the tragedy of the Cross, and the triumph of an empty garden tomb. May we feel infinitely loved, such to the point that we cannot help but love God’s other beloved ones.

If the Gospel can compel me to look after orphans and widows in their distress, is it not powerful enough to compel me to look after my words? If the Gospel is so wonderful that social norms are annihilated from my thoughts, is it wonderful enough to silence the critical words I so often harbor?

“Praising and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers, these things should not be this way.”