

was twofold. First, the Tanach teaches us that this region was used for pagan sacrifices by fire to Molech, including human sacrifice (2Ki 23:10; Jer 7:31). Secondly, it was the refuse dump for Jerusalem in which the garbage was continually being burned. By the time of the Apostolic Scriptures, the name *Gehenna* was used to describe the eschatological place of eternal, fiery punishment and corruption.

Thus, when James writes that such ungodly use of the tongue is “set on fire by hell,” he teaches us that the enemy of our souls, the great deceiver himself, is even the one who encourages such *lashon hara’* because he knows the utter devastation that can result from it. If, by the true work of the Spirit within us who are believers, we truly desire to love and worship the God Who saved us, dedicating ourselves to be His witnesses upon this earth and to extol the glories of our Savior Yeshua, then we must give no place for the enemy in our lives. That James has clearly taught us that the evil use of the tongue is spawned and encourage by the Devil himself, we ought to hate evil speech and commit ourselves constantly to guard against it, being diligent not to engage in slander or gossip, nor to listen to such talk when initiated by others.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be
acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.
(Ps 19:14)

7–8 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

The opening “For” (*γάρ, gar*) connects verses 8 and 9 to the previous context by emphasizing how James has characterized the tongue, namely, that apart from God’s enabling, it is uncontrollable, even as a raging forest fire is unable to be controlled. He does this by way of comparison to how mankind has controlled all manner of animals in the world. This harkens back to the sovereign plan of God in creating mankind and the command given to Adam and Chavah. In Gen 1:26 and we hear the decree of God in creating mankind, and in Gen 9:2, the divine order give to Adam and Chavah as representatives of mankind.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea

and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Gen 1:26)

The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. (Gen 9:2)

For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea... The word translated “species” is the Greek φύσις (*phusis*) which carries the sense of “the natural character of an entity.”¹ James gives four categories or “kinds” of animals: (1) “beasts” (θηρίον, *thērion*), which has the general meaning of “any living creature, excluding humans.”² but in our context points specifically to land animals, and may denote specifically quadrupeds and perhaps those which are undomesticated: (2) “birds” (πετεινόν, *peteinon*), which may simply denote all creatures that fly in the air: (3) “reptiles” (έρπετόν, *herpeton*), snakes, etc.: (4) “creatures of the sea” (ἐνάλιος, *enaliος*), the Greek word (used only here in the Apostolic Scriptures) carries the meaning of those animals that exist in the water or sea.

...is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. – In enumerating the fourfold description of animals, James is clearly describing the whole of the “animal kingdom” which, as noted above, hearkens back to the divine mandate given by God to mankind, that they should rule over the animal kingdom. James uses the verb “to tame” (δαμάζω, *damazō*) which can mean “to domesticate” or “to subdue.” The fact that James gives both the verb in the present aspect (“is tamed”) and in the perfect aspect (“has been tamed”) ties it back to the creation mandate given to mankind. From the beginning of creation, mankind was given both the mandate as well as the ability to rule over the animal kingdom. This does not mean that every kind of animal had been domesticated in the ancient world or even in the modern world. While the verb *damazō* does carry the sense of “tame” or “domesticate,” it likewise can mean “to subdue,” thus even the hunter “subdues” the animal he hunts. The primary point James is making is that the “human race”³ has been given

1 BDAG, “φύσις,” p. 1069.

2 Ibid., “θηρίον,” p. 455.

3 In the Greek, what is translated as “human nature” by the NASB is more literally “human kind,” utilizing the Greek φύσις (*phusis*) again: τῆ φύσει τῆ ἀνθρωπίνῃ

the ability by God to “tame” or “subdue” the animal kingdom, and it is this ability that He will now contrast with the struggle to “tame the tongue.”

But no one can tame the tongue... – James now uses the same verbiage but now applies it to “taming the tongue” and the point he is making is perfectly clear. While God has created mankind with the ability to tame or subdue every aspect of the animal kingdom, due to our sinful nature, we are not able in and of ourselves to control the tongue so as to honor God in all that we say. The only way that God can be honored in the use of our tongue is if we are graced with the gift of His salvation and thereby given the enabling work of the Ruach HaKodesh to honor our Creator and Redeemer by controlling the tongue and using our speech, in all aspects of our lives, to honor Him. But for this to be a reality, we must submit ourselves to Him and in so doing, to “walk by the Spirit” and “not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16).

...it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. – When James refers to the tongue as a “restless evil,” the word translated by the NASB as “restless” is ἀκατάστατος, *akatastatos*. We have encountered this same word in James 1:7–8,

For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable (ἀκατάστατος, *akatastatos*) in all his ways. (James 1:7-8)

When *akatastatos*, meaning “unstable,” is combined with “evil” (*kakós*, *kakos*), it spells certain disaster. It is like a drunk playing with hand grenades. Once again, James gives a vivid picture of the evil power of the tongue. When controlled by the sinful nature, it is a source of powerful destruction.

...and full of deadly poison. – The obvious point James is making is that when the tongue is unrestrained, or “untamed,” its ability to produce unmitigated carnage is strong, a kind of devastation that brings death, that is, that divides people against each other and can destroy a person’s reputation.

Paul teaches the same message in Rom 3:1 when he characterizes fallen mankind as dominated by sin, quoting from Psalms 5 and 140.

There is nothing reliable in what they say; Their inward part is destruction itself. Their throat is an open grave; They flatter with their tongue. (Ps 5:9) They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their lips. Selah. (Ps 140:3)

Using “poison” as a way to characterize the evil use of the tongue points directly to slander and gossip. For damage that can be done to a person’s reputation when being the object of slander cannot be measured, for it increases exponentially as the slander or evil speech is repeated by others. Washington Irving puts it this way: “A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use.”¹

9–10 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

James now teaches us that the tongue can surely be the source of blessing or of cursing, but ultimately it cannot be good at both. The one who engages in slander and gossip cannot be trusted to have good motives even when they say something nice, for they have already been characterized as speaking in way to set themselves forward as better than others.

James comes to the point directly: we use our tongue to bless our Lord and Father, engaging in corporate worship, and giving Him honor. Then with the same tongue we slander and by doing so, curse our fellow man who likewise was created in the image of God. So when one praises God, He is extolled for His being the Creator, Who stated that all He created was good, even very good.

God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.
(Gen 1:31)

When someone slanders another person, he is essentially calling God a liar, for he is declaring that the person he is slandering is not one who is created in the very image of God, that is, “made in the likeness of God.” Such a contrary use of the tongue is reminiscent of the “double-minded man” in James 1:6–8 who is “unstable in all his ways.”

The human being was made for God, fashioned to know God and to reflect the attributes of God in a creaturely way. To dishonor any human being in some way dishonors God. Those who bless God out of one side of their mouths and curse their neighbors out of the other side are double-tongued in speech-acts, recalling the double-minded man in 1:6–8.²

1 From Washington Irving, *Rip Van Winkle* (Boston, 1888), p. 19.

2 Richardson, *James*, p. 158.

These inspired words of James should cause us to truly search our hearts to see if there is any part of this ambiguity in which we are engaged. Do we participate in the liturgical blessings together with our fellow believers? Do we bless the Lord in time of worship and song? And then do we likewise engage in slandering others? These are important questions to ask so that we might more and more guard our tongues to be used for the praise and honor of God and not for slandering others who likewise bear the very image of their Creator.

My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. – Now James makes it very clear that for those who profess Yeshua to be their Lord and Master, but are characterized by engaging in slander and gossip, their profession of faith is questionable. For a true life of faith in Yeshua will, inevitably, result in becoming more and more conformed to Him and to His will.

To show that one cannot be a true follower of Yeshua while having a life characterized by slander and gossip, James now gives us a final illustration to firmly establish his main point: being a true child of God means to become more and more conformed to His will.

11–12 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Once again James turns to illustrations from nature to describe the utter impossibility of a true child of God to have a duplicitous character of both “righteous” and “unrighteous.” A fountain, so singularly important for obtaining life-sustaining water, does not in nature switch between fresh water and bitter, “gushing forth” (βρῦω, *bruō*) one day with drinkable and another day with brackish, undrinkable water.

Moreover, a fig tree never gives forth olives, nor does the vine ever produce figs. This would be contrary to the very nature of the plants themselves. Likewise, the child of God cannot be known as blessing on the one hand and engaging in slander on the other.

The final illustration, that “salt water cannot produce fresh,” may have the situation in mind of an estuary in which fresh water and salty water flow together and are mixed. Even a small amount of salt water will render the whole undrinkable. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (1Cor 5:6). The application is obvious: if we seek to be known as followers of Yeshua, we must strive in every way to put away any kind of slander and/or gossip, and guard our tongues so that we honor the Lord as well as our fellowman.

Excursus on *Lashon Hara'*

The topic of *Lashon Hara'* (evil speech, slander, or gossip) is an important one for all of us to consider as we seek to serve our Lord, walking in His footsteps and sanctifying His Name upon the earth. I am convinced that Messianic communities intent upon living by the Scriptures face a wonderful and strategic challenge in these days. This challenge is to make known the glories of our Messiah Yeshua and the Good News that He is the way to be reconciled to the Father. Consider the prophecy of Zechariah:

Thus says Adonai of hosts, In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the corner of the garment (i.e., the tzitzit) of a Jew saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." (Zech 8:23)

This means that Messianic believers will be sought after by those seeking the truth, and given an opportunity to share the Good News of Yeshua, that He is the Messiah sent by the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many indicators, including the return of our people to the Land, the increasing tensions in the Middle East, the fight over the city of Yerushalaim, point to this being a strategic time in the expansion and growth of the kingdom of Yeshua. Add to this the increasing interest of the mainline churches regarding the Jewishness of the Christian faith, and it is easy to see that Messianic believers have a very important role to perform now and in the future. I hope that we intend to accept the challenge that is before us, and that we will work diligently to prepare ourselves to serve our King as He desires.

With this in mind, a question for us all is this: what kinds of things will Satan attempt to put in our path in order to cause us to fail in the mission Yeshua has given us to accomplish? Surely his strategies are multifaceted, but I want to emphasize just one, that of *lashon hara'*, "evil speech" or "slander." Perhaps nothing more diminishes the ability of a community of believers to work together in service for Yeshua than the sin of slander—seeking to ruin the reputation of another person through speaking gossip against them. Unfortunately, every one of us must admit that in one way or another, we have engaged in this sin and to one extent or another have therefore weakened our ability to fulfill the mission Yeshua has designed for us. A re-commitment to guarding our tongues will therefore help strengthen us against Satan's schemes.

We have considered the words of James in his Epistle where he

teaches that the ability to control the tongue is a genuine mark of spiritual maturity (2:1); that the tongue is like a fire, able to set an entire forest ablaze (2:5) and able to burn all the other members of the body, defiling them and even setting the course of life on fire. He boldly states that the slandering tongue is set on fire by hell itself (3:6). He calls the tongue “a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (3:8) and chastens his readers with the thought that with the same tongue we bless the Lord and curse our fellow man who is created in His image (3:9). Clearly, James recognized that *lashon hara'* could easily do severe damage to the cause of Messiah. He therefore warns the Messianic community in his time, as well as warning us, about engaging in evil speech.

How might we define *lashon hara'*? What is it? Evil speech, in its simplest definition, is talking about a person in such a way as to degrade them in the eyes of others. Even if what is being communicated is true, to do so may constitute slander, for we are called upon to love one another, and love seeks to cover rather than broadcast a person's faults: “...love covers a multitude of sins” (1Pet 4:8). Moreover, Yeshua taught us that if a brother has sinned, we are to go to that person privately, and even take a second person with us if rebuffed. Only when the sin is unchecked and unresolved is the matter to be made known to the whole assembly (Matt 18:15ff).

We should be careful, however, not to think that disagreeing with someone constitutes *lashon hara'*, so long as we can disagree without attacking the character of the person with whom we disagree. For instance, authors and teacher who write and put their writings into published formats should expect that there will be those who disagree with their methods as well as their conclusions. Disagreeing in a civil and careful way (meaning not resorting to *ad hominem* attacks) is not *lashon hara'* even if the disagreement is sharply stated.

If what I have suggested is true, that as Messianic believers we stand at a strategic crossroads poised to fulfill a vital role in the expansion of Yeshua's kingdom, then I think we can count on it: Satan will urge us to engage in *lashon hara'* as a means of defeating us and making us less than effective in the service of our Messiah. How can we guard against this sin? How can we thwart the deceitful schemes of the evil one? How can we prepare so that we do not fall into this trap of engaging in slander against a fellow believer in Yeshua?

First, we must agree that *lashon hara'* is a sin, and commit ourselves to view it as such. Once again, *lashon hara'* may easily be defined as speech about another person that will cause that person to be diminished or despised in the mind of those who listen. Thus, one may en-

gage in *lashon hara'* both by speaking slander and/or by listening to it. We must commit ourselves, therefore, not to engage in it, and gently but firmly refusing to listen to it. One may excuse oneself when such speech begins, or even warn the speaker: "I wouldn't want to be spoken of like this, so I don't want to participate in speaking about so-and-so in a negative way." This will be humbling, but if we all commit to guarding our tongues as James teaches, we will welcome the gentle reminder when we begin to slip into slanderous speech.

Secondly, we must commit ourselves to seeking the forgiveness of someone we have slandered. This is very difficult, but has a twofold benefit. It restores a path of fellowship between the slanderer and the one slandered, and it reminds the slanderer of the consequences of *lashon hara'*.

Thirdly, if we find ourselves in a situation where we can neither leave the room nor encourage the speaker to stop, we must commit ourselves not to believe the slanderous speech. We simply are not allowed to have the person who is being slandered diminished in our opinion or perspective. We must think of that person and act toward him or her as though the slander had never occurred.

Fourthly, we must commit ourselves to wholesome speech, and to building each other up in the faith. Being mindful to speak good of each other is an obvious protection against the negativity of *lashon hara'*. We must look for those qualities and actions in each other which can be the basis of our praise, and when speaking of one another we must do so with the intent of causing the person we talk about to be appreciated all the more by those who are listening. Moreover, we should always be mindful of Yeshua's teaching about seeing a splinter in the eye of our brother while having a log in our own eye:

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matt 7:1-5)

Once the log is out of my eye, I will see more clearly to help my brother remove the splinter in his and do so with humility, gentleness, and love.

There are times when it is necessary to speak in a negative way

about another person, but this must be reserved for issues where two or three witnesses are attempting to secure justice in regard to a crime committed, or where the welfare of the community of faith requires a warning about a given individual. Even here, however, every effort must be made to find ways of warning without specifically demeaning someone else. So while there are legitimate cases where negative speech must occur, let us not make the exception a rationale for *lashon hara'*. May the Lord strengthen our respective communities as we seek to love each other in word and deed, and not allow the trap of *lashon hara'* to diminish our effectiveness for Him!

(End of Excursus)

13 – Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

In the previous section of our chapter, James has centered his attention on the evil of *lashon hara'*, “gossip” and “slander,” describing in picturesque terms the great damage that can be done to a believing community when such evil speech prevails. It is like a forest fire which devours everything in its path. He then goes on to teach us that those who are truly born from above and whose lives are therefore changed by the work of the Ruach in regeneration and sanctification, will never be characterized as “gossips” and “slanderers.” Even as a fountain of water cannot bring forth clean and salty water, or as a fig tree produces olives or a grape vine brings forth figs, so a person who has been truly born again to a new life will not be characterized or known as one who engages in evil speech (*lashon hara'*).

But even though the believer’s life is not to be characterized by gossip and slander, yet even true believers still have the sinful nature and are able to grieve the Spirit of God by yielding to the flesh and thereby sinning (cf. Eph 4:30; Gal 5:17).

So with this in mind, James now teaches us what it is that most often motivates a person to engage in gossip or slander. It is to attain for oneself a place of prominence by ascribing faults and weaknesses in others, particularly those who may be in a place of leadership and authority. As Calvin notes:

As the lust of slandering arises mostly from pride, and as the false conceit of wisdom for the most part generates pride, he therefore speaks here of wisdom. It is usual with hypocrites