

**James 3:4** Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. (NASB)

1. This verse begins with imperative mood #23, the aorist middle imperative of ὁράω (*horáō*), which captures our attention.
2. The command is for the reader to consider another example, “Look at the ships!” The word for ship is the noun πλοῖον (*plōion*), “a rather large sea-faring ship.”<sup>3</sup>
3. The New Testament contains several references to boats and ships, the former on lakes and the latter on seas, especially the latter on which Paul sailed in Acts 27 and 28.
4. Paul was in the custody of Julius, a Roman centurion, who was commissioned to bring Paul to Rome for a hearing before Caesar. Also, on board was Luke who chronicled the mission, noted in Acts 27:1–28:16. At the city of Myra in Lycia, the three men booked passage on a corn ship bound for Rome:  
**The size of the vessel is indicated by the fact that there were 276 persons on board, crew and passengers all told (Acts 27:37). Luke has made no note of the name of this vessel.**
5. The ship to which James refers was among those common in the Graeco-Roman world. The ships of the first century had a high bow that came down into the deck and had a number of masts including the main mast.
6. The rudders were quite small by comparison to the size of the ship, described in the verse as “so great,” the adjective τηλικοῦτος (*tēlikoútos*): “so vast, so mighty, so large.”
7. The ship was “driven by strong winds” caught by its several sails. The word “strong” is the adjective σκληρός (*sklēros*): “fierce, violent.” In our study of the passage referenced in Acts above, we were able to identify this incidence as a Mediterranean hurricane.
8. There are not much sails and rudders can do in managing the wave and wind action of a hurricane, but together they cooperate to propel the ship forward.

<sup>3</sup> Bauer, “πλοῖον,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed., 830.



9. Absent these impediments, the rudder's task was to direct the ship along a course to Rome. Like the horse, the ship is a very large, seagoing vessel, but it is incapable of maintaining an assigned course without a rudder.
10. Here is an example of what happens when a ship loses one of its screws [ the propellers of a ship]:

A thing need not be physically large in order to be important. The degree of control which the rudder exerts upon the course of a great ship is disproportionate to its size. The ship goes in the direction dictated by the impulse of the man at the helm. The starboard screw on a 19,000 ton ocean liner broke off in the mid-Atlantic. The captain, en route to Europe, immediately ordered that the speed be reduced to eight knots, even though it meant that the ship would be a week late in Southampton. He explained that the loss of the starboard screw resulted in a torque effect which would drive the ship in a circle to the right. The rudder would be used to hold against the force of the torsion and thus keep the ship on course, but only at a reduced speed. Otherwise the strain on the rudder could snap it, in which case the ship would be helpless and could only wait for a rescue tug to come out of England and tow it to port. We limped in to Amsterdam with the loss of a week from a summer's study tour. Later that summer we saw the ship in dry dock in Amsterdam and were able to appreciate how small the rudder was in comparison to the ship.<sup>4</sup>

11. James's illustrations of the bit (v. 3), the rudder (v. 4), and the flame (v. 5) stress what appears to be small and insignificant but the absence of the first two results in the cause of great disorder while the presence of the third has the same result.
12. The human body is quite large by comparison to the organ of the tongue, but when used by a believer without reference to the working objects of doctrine in the soul, it causes spiritual disorder among those affected by it.
13. As is noted above, ships are driven by strong winds which fill the sails, but the ship goes in whatever direction the wind blows unless it is "directed by a very strong rudder."

**(End JAS3-20. See JAS3-21 for continuation of study at p. 201.)**

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<sup>4</sup> Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament: James et al.* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1985), 16:561-62.



14. The power possessed by a believer is potentially kinetic, but the failure to grow spiritually causes the content of his stream of consciousness to remain inactive with regard to a biblical inventory of ideas.
15. A believer without doctrine has no biblical problem-solving devices and is therefore at the mercy of the cosmic residents of the devil's world.
16. The ship in our context is large, the winds are strong yet regardless of these advantages the ship is able to stay on course by being guided by a very small rudder.
17. The word "driven" is the present passive participle of **ἐλαύνω** (*elaínō*): "to be propelled, to advance, to make progress." It is in the passive voice and best translated, "and are propelled."
18. There are a number of things going on simultaneously here. The ship, *ploíon*, is quite large, *tēlikoútos*, propelled, *elaínō*, by fierce, *sklēros*, winds, but nevertheless, these things are "directed," the present passive indicative of the verb **μετάγω** (*metágō*): "to direct, steer, or guide," by "a very small rudder," **πηδάλιον** (*pēdálion*).
19. The huge ship is being propelled by fierce winds but is being directed, steered, and guided by a very small rudder. Big ship, stormy seas, fierce winds blowing into giant sails yet at the mercy of these elements were it not for the very small rudder, a *pēdálion* that keeps them on course.
20. The rudder is a piece of machinery so even its function is dependent upon the desires of the "pilot." Let's take a look at the last phrase of verse 4, "... whithersoever the governor listeth."
21. "Whithersoever" is changed by the NASB to "wherever." The "governor" is the **ὀρμή** (*ormḗ*): the "pilot." And he determines the direction the rudder is set to advance toward the destination.
22. The word that indicates the pilot's directives is the compound of two verbs, **βούλομαι** (*boúlomai*): "predisposition," and **εὐθύνω** (*euthúnō*): "to steer a ship." Together these two words refer to the pilot's predisposition about the course he wishes for the ship to travel and therefore the positioning of the rudder to accomplish that objective.

23. Here is the expanded translation of verse 4:

**James 3:4** Consider the example of ships which are quite large and are propelled under the influence of fierce winds upon its sails, yet it is guided by the positioning of a very small rudder toward whatever direction the volition of the ship's pilot determines.  
(EXT)

### Principles:

1. The ship is the second example that James uses to address the power of the tongue, illustrated in verse 3 by the bit in a horse's mouth and in verse 4 by the rudder of a ship.
2. The horse is a large, strong, and yet trainable animal. We have noted quite a number of principles associated with the flexibility horses have in the learning process.
3. The horse is easily controlled by the bit and bridle. The second illustration is the ship whose rudder is small, especially by comparison to the boat it is tasked to guide.
4. James's major points in his illustration is that the tongue is small compared to the size of the human body just as the rudder is small compared to the size of the ship.
5. The bit in the horse's mouth is behind its tongue; the rudder of the ship is paltry by comparison to the ship it guides. When two people engage in disagreements the result can often lead to use of fisticuffs, arms, elbows, legs, knees, feet, and body slams.
6. Yet those tactics are usually employed one-on-one. Eventually the fight is over, one makes his point while the other nurses his wounds. There is yet another part of the human body that can do far worse damage and include an entire group of people.
7. Lasting damage to a congregation can rip apart its membership when one person uses his tongue to gossip, malign, judge, criticize, insult, or demean a fellow believer.
8. Sides are taken; some leave the church others separate but continue to attend; some agree with the accusations while others do not. Regardless of the responses, pro and con, the congregation suffers divisions that without the application of the Royal Law the body remains fractured by the use of an easily enunciated criticism of a fellow believer.



9. Therefore, the body of Christ, which makes up a congregation, is damaged by the verbal assault of one person. Sides are taken, lines are drawn, and doctrine takes a holiday if not a sabbatical.
10. The chaos caused is done by a simple but tremendously devastating remark, one that James critiques in:

**James 1:21** Therefore, put away from yourself mental attitude sins that pollute the soul and all the excesses of an evil habit of mind, you must receive with humility the implanted word, which is empowered to deliver your souls from danger.

**v. 22** But keep on becoming doers of the implanted Word, and not only hearers who deceive themselves due to self-induced stupidity.

**v. 23** For if, and it is true, anyone is a hearer of the Word in the *noús* and not a doer from the *kardía*, such a person, is like a nobleman who looks contemplatively at his facial features in a mirror;

**v. 24** for once he had continued to contemplate himself intently in the mirror and departed, he has the existing result of immediately disregarding what kind of man he habitually and regularly was.

**v. 25** But the one who looks with an earnest desire to absorb in detail the perfect law of freedom, and continues to live in close proximity to it, not having become a forgetful hearer only, but a doer, this man shall acquire unalloyed happiness by the production of divine good. (EXT)

11. The most devastating thing a believer can do is to verbally gossip, criticize, or denigrate another believer. The Royal Law does not permit this which our study of the edification complex of the soul clearly taught.
12. This doctrine presented a foundation and seven advancing levels of spiritual growth that when accumulated and applied resulted in invisible impact for that believer.
13. The foundation is obviously salvation. There has to be a starting place and acquisition of divine viewpoint and advancement toward the understanding and use of the Royal Law and the Law of Freedom are developed by means of a process.

