

Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 3:1-12

Topic

To emphasize his point that your tongue can cause incredible harm, James says "it is set on fire by Hell"

Title

"Pit Got Your Tongue?"

Introduction

Originally developed by *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the twelve-step method has been adapted widely by groups of people recovering from various addictions, compulsive behaviors, and mental health problems.

You're probably familiar with, or at least you're not surprised to hear about, the following Anonymous groups: *Gamblers Anonymous*, *Narcotics Anonymous*, and *Overeaters Anonymous*.

There are several lesser-known Anonymous groups:

FAA - *Food Addicts Anonymous*. They offer help for recovery from the despair and shame of food obsession.

OLGA - *Online Gamers Anonymous*. Their website says, "We share our experience, strengths and hope to help each other recover and heal from problems caused by excessive game playing, whether it be computer, video, console, or on-line." If you are playing a game right now, you've got a real problem.

CA - *Clutterers Anonymous*. It used to be a "clutterer" was either considered a slob or just the crazy person on the block who never threw anything away. But then came the TV show *Hoarders*, and clutterers came out of the junk-closet.

SA - *Spenders Anonymous*. They have a slogan, "The best things in life are not things." We're coming into arguably the toughest season for these folks. If you're struggling with over-spending at Christmas, and you do happen to fall off the wagon... I wear size Large in shirts and enjoy Civet coffee.

James could have started *Tongues Anonymous*. As we approach our verses, I can imagine James saying, "Hi, I'm James, and my tongue is untamed."

As a group, *Tongues Anonymous* would include **everyone** - because James says, "**no man** can tame the tongue" (v8).

If I'm not mistaken, the first step in all these Anonymous groups is admitting you have a problem.

Surprisingly, James offers no further steps beyond admitting you have a problem for overcoming the untamed tongue. Instead he presents a series of comparisons that reveal how prevalent and awful the problem really is.

His was a one-step to recovery program: Admit your problem. Because, once you do, what *you* cannot tame, *God* can, and will, tame.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Can Rely On God's Dynamic Power To Tame Your Tongue, or #2 You Can Release The Destructive Power Of Your Untamed Tongue.

#1 You Can Rely On God's Dynamic Power To Tame Your Tongue

(v1-2)

Did anyone ever ask you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Verse one of our text makes it sound like the dispersed adult Messianic Jews that James was writing to would answer, "a teacher of God's Word."

He didn't exactly encourage it, and we'll see why.

Jas 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

The language and the context indicate they aspired to be teachers. There was something about their situation as persecuted believers that was contributing to their aspiration.

After 9-11, many retired military re-enlisted; and a lot of civilians enlisted. That same dynamic was at work among the dispersed Jews. There was something about being persecuted and dispersed that caused them to want to teach.

Teaching God's Word, however, is a gift. The apostle Paul tells us that God gives gifted men to the church as pastor-teachers (Ephesians 4:1-12).

He says in another place, "God has appointed in the church... teachers" (First Corinthians 12:28). He says, " Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them... the one who teaches, in his teaching" (Romans 12:6-7).

Gifts are given by the Holy Spirit as He sees fit, and not as we desire or aspire to them - and that certainly includes teaching God's Word.

Just in case there were, among them, those with the gift of teaching, James reminds them that teachers, like himself, "shall receive a stricter judgment."

He was talking mostly about the future judgement at the Reward Seat of Jesus. But we see that teachers of God's Word receive a stricter judgment even now, by the church and by society.

A man can cheat on his wife, or be arrested for a DUI, and not have it affect his career at all. Unless he is in the ministry; then he becomes disqualified, and people argue about whether he can ever teach again.

(Ministry is certainly not the only walk of life where conduct is severely judged. But teaching the Bible holds you to a higher standard).

We can't argue with God about His "stricter judgment" of teachers. Others are following their lead, believing that God is using them to expound spiritual truth.

It should be daunting. Everyone who teaches God's Word ought to feel a little like Jeremiah. At his calling, Jeremiah said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak... (1:6).

Later, Jeremiah wanted to quit. *But he found that he couldn't!*

Jer 20:9 Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not.

Bible teachers must simultaneously have a reverent reluctance *and* a consuming passion to communicate.

James wasn't elevating teachers. He was describing their calling, their gifting, to those who aspired to the work without God's anointing.

Just because you aren't called to teach, it doesn't mean you're off the hook. **The words of every believer are heavily weighted.**

Jas 3:2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

It's a fact that we are in a spiritual conflict. After we are born again, we find within us the flesh - a propensity to sin by satisfying our natural appetites in excessive, even evil, ways.

I mentioned the Anonymous 12-step groups. They all exist because our flesh is yielded to, and we sin.

On top of the war within us, we have spiritual foes - a host of malevolent beings, under the direction of Satan, who seek constantly to defeat us. They are highly organized, and super-powerful.

We therefore "stumble in many things." We like to describe our relationship with Jesus as a walk. We are walking with Him through our lives, on a journey towards home.

We're walking, when suddenly, *Bam* - we stumble on something.

Think of it in terms of tripping while walking. Sometimes we can catch ourselves before too much damage is done. Other times we go down hard, and do long-term, or even lasting, damage.

"Many things" can cause us to stumble. We have our own unique temptations, as well as there being secret supernatural strategies that are being plotted against us.

Let's say that you *are* stumbling in some area. Where do you begin, in terms of overcoming it?

If I'm understanding James, what he says next is his suggestion for where to begin if we want to overcome our stumbling.

Whether your problem is alcohol, overeating... or cluttering or overspending... **James says to start with your tongue.**

Notice he says, "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." A "bridle" is that which controls and guides the horse you are riding.

James sees the tamed-tongue as a bridle that can guide you, keeping you from stumbling. In fact, he says you will be "perfect," meaning you will make progress in your walk, growing and maturing.

Somehow the tamed-tongue affects "the whole body."

In practical terms, you may or may not attend a Christian recovery group. Whether you do or not, priority one - **you must deal with your tongue.**

What do we mean by the "tongue?" Is it just a careful editing of the words you speak?

Is it taking the advice of Thumper's dad, who said, "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin' at all?"

It's more than the words you speak. *Anyone can fake it.* For example, we're in a political season in which we expect politicians to say things they don't mean.

The tongue is not just the actual words you speak, although they are important. It's the heart behind the words. In Luke 6:45 we read, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

You can "produce evil" even if your actual words sound good. Satan's speech to Eve in the Garden of Eden certainly sounded good.

So did his enticements to Jesus, in the 40-day wilderness temptation.

So do his enticements to you and I.

Implied is that you *can* tame your tongue by dealing with your heart in the power of the Holy Spirit. While it is true that "no **man** can tame the tongue," **God can tame it.**

Another way of saying this is that too often we deal with the symptoms of our sin and stumbling instead of the root cause. We need God to search us, for His Word to divide between our soul and our spirit, and show us the inner disease that plagues us.

One commentator wrote, "The real trouble lies in the heart behind the tongue, and the seat of the disease being in the heart, there the remedy must be applied."

The one-step recovery program is to admit you have a problem. Then repent and yield yourself to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It will result in a God-tamed tongue.

#2 You Can Release The Destructive Power Of Your Untamed Tongue

(v3-12)

When you go to the doctor, he asks you to stick out your tongue, and he takes a look at it. He can tell your condition by your tongue; your tongue reveals what is going on in your body.

While it is possible for a persons words to sound good when they are really bad, mostly our words give away what is in our hearts.

We frequently say, "I can't see another person's heart." That's not totally true. When I'm acting badly, arguing, complaining, using coarse or curse words, yelling - *you are seeing exactly what is in my heart.*

James just said that the tongue can have a profound effect on the whole body. Even I must admit it seems like our problems are far more complex.

I mean, how would it be received if I went to an AA meeting (or any Anonymous meeting), and said, "Hi, I'm Gene, and I have an untamed tongue"?

James anticipates our skepticism and shows us the power of the untamed tongue using two comparisons.

Jas 3:3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

Jas 3:4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.

Something relatively small - a "bit," or a "rudder," - is nevertheless powerful enough to guide and control something that is much greater.

So, yes, your God-tamed tongue *can* direct your body, and keep you from stumbling.

OR your untamed tongue can be the single most destructive force on earth.

Jas 3:5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

"Don't play with matches. Only you can prevent forest fires."

That tiny flame can start a blaze that destroys forests and homes and lives.

Want to cripple your marriage? All you need to do is use the "D" word in an argument - "Divorce." Its the nuclear option, cancelling-out hope for future harmony.

Jas 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

The untamed tongue is as powerful an agent of destruction as any flame, always ready to start a blaze.

It is "a world of iniquity." We just got back from five days at Walt Disney World. You feel like you're in another world, its so big. In fact, it encompasses 30,000 acres, making it roughly the size of San Francisco. It is enjoyed by 48million guests annually.

Everything is themed. Each park has a theme; each land in each park has a theme; each ride in each land has a theme. It is a vast "world" of fantasy, innovation, and imagination.

When your tongue is untamed, you're in a vast "world" whose theme is "iniquity" - meaning sin.

The sin you are yielding to can be considered a slum in the world of iniquity; and your particular expression of sin, a shanty you're in. The possibilities are, sadly, endless.

James says "it defiles the whole body." He keeps driving home this point that the tongue is where the action is. Because it is connected to the heart (spiritually speaking), your tongue controls everything else.

Untamed, it is a match to the tinder of your "nature." As an example I'd use road rage. There have been a couple of notable cases recently in the news, one involving former NFL running back Joe McKnight, who was killed.

In another incident, Cardell Hayes, the 28-year-old who shot and killed former New Orleans Saints player Will Smith earlier this year, was found guilty of manslaughter.

In court documents, authorities said that Smith and his wife were shot by Hayes in April after he rear-ended their vehicle with his Hummer, after which the two men "exchanged words" and Hayes "produced a handgun and shot Smith multiple times."

What turns ordinary people into killers almost instantaneously? Their nature is set on fire by what is happening in their heart, verbalized by their tongue.

Jas 3:7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

Shamu. Bart the Bear. Charlie the Lonesome Cougar. It's amazing to see these beasts obey their tamers.

Jas 3:8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

The "deadly poison" James mentions is venom from a snake. I'm not sure if he had snake-charmers in mind. Snake-charming can be found in ancient Egyptian history. I was surprised to find it in the Bible.

Psa 58:3 The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.

Psa 58:4 Their poison is like the poison of a serpent; They are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear,

Psa 58:5 Which will not heed the voice of charmers, Charming ever so skillfully.

If you are a snake-charmer, and you haven't yet altered your snake to prevent its bite from releasing venom, *you don't want your snake to be deaf.*

On our own, trying to "charm" the tongue, we will fail. Our flesh is deaf to all natural means of help.

"No man can tame the tongue," *but God can*, supernaturally, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Jas 3:9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.

James was all-about elevating our understanding of how serious things are. If I "curse" someone, which simply means I speak ill of them in any manner, I'm really exposing my contempt for God - Who made that person in His own image.

To put it another way, if I wouldn't openly speak ill of God, why will I do so against one of His dearly beloved children?

Jas 3:10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

We get our own fountain drinks now. You order at the counter, and the cashier hands you an empty cup. You go over to the machine, dispense ice if you want it, then pick your drink.

It's bad enough that half the time the thing is out of gas, so your Coke tastes like syrup.

What if half the time, randomly, the machine dispensed a deadly poison that tasted just like Coke? You'd probably bring your own bottled water.

Jas 3:11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?

I keep referring to the Holy Spirit, and His empowering indwelling, when James hasn't specifically mentioned Him.

I think that's OK, because his readers, and us, know that we have His empowering indwelling. It's understood, and doesn't need to be explained.

There may be a nod to the Holy Spirit in verse eleven, with the mention of a "spring [sending] forth fresh water." It is reminiscent of Jesus' promise that, "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

Then we read,

Joh 7:39 But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive...

Our hearts are the "spring" from which either will flow rivers of living water, or "bitter" water.

The rivers of living water are released by a God-tamed tongue. The bitter, by your untamed tongue.

Jas 3:12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

It is the nature of a fig tree to produce figs. Likewise the olive tree, and the grapevine, produce according to their own nature.

If I am born-again, I have a new nature - a divine nature - that should produce fruit after its kind.

The difference between me and a fig tree is that I can still produce after my old nature, on account of the flesh.

I can produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit; I can produce the works of the flesh.

In terms of the salt water/fresh water analogy, James makes a pretty bold statement. He says I can't be producing both at the same time.

I tend to think that I can be bringing forth fresh, life-giving water for the most part, with perhaps a tiny amount of salt water, because of some sin or sins I refuse to repent of.

But even a grain of salt will pollute the fresh flow.

We all understand that a tiny amount of toxin will pollute an entire water supply.

I was going to look-up some measurements, but as I was typing in Google, "how much poison to contaminate water supply," I realized that someone, somewhere, is monitoring my keystrokes. I'd like to remain a free citizen.

Let's not get overwhelmed. James, you remember, included himself as someone who "stumbles in many things." He's not arguing for some kind of sinless perfection.

He is merely, but forcefully, asking us to be serious about heart-sin, and to not try to harbor it, but to admit it, and repent.

And he is offering the incredible encouragement that God *can* and *will* tame our tongues if we will yield to Him.

In the end, I must say, "Hi, my name is Gene, and I have an untamed tongue."

We should all take that one-step to recovery, and allow God to reveal the "world of iniquity" that we are harboring within our hearts.

If you're a Christian, don't keep dealing with the symptoms of your sin. Go to the root and repent.

If you're not a Christian, maybe you're thinking, "I go to recovery meetings; I've got this."

I'm happy for you if you are controlling your behavior for the betterment of yourself and society. I hope you keep earning your badges or tokens or pins.

In the end, however, it matters not that you gain the whole world, if you lose your soul.

Jesus said, "You must be born-again," and that happens when you believe in Him to forgive your sin at the Cross of Calvary.

Have you been born-again?