

Fire Prevention

We've had a couple of very scary wildfire seasons these last two summers, haven't we? Even here on the wetter west side of the mountains, we are no longer immune to the danger. One tiny spark, one carelessly discarded cigarette and the blaze is quickly out of control, destroying everything in its path: forests, homes, businesses, even lives.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire... a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth comes praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. (James 3:5-6, 8-10)

Slander, lies, mean-spirited political rhetoric: the secular world abounds with examples of people using their tongues (or written words) as hurtful weapons. But it's even more disconcerting when it happens in a church. I'm not talking about anything as major as shouting insults or covert character assassination. I'm talking about a little grumbling here, a bit of gossip there, or a careless critical remark – small things, really, subtle, maybe even accidental. No harm intended.

Problem is, small things can do great damage. And whether the fire is set deliberately or accidentally, the forest burns just the same.

The enemy delights in seeing us distracted and divided. But what does God's Word say? As the *Body of Christ*, we are to strive for unity in the Holy Spirit, to bear with one another in love, and build each other up (Eph. 4:1-16). We are to encourage and respect those who lead and work alongside us, to be kind and patient with one another (1 Thes. 5:11-15) – united in faith and in fervent devotion to God.

I know, I know. You care about your church and just want things to be done "right." I do too, and it's SO tempting to offer our "helpful suggestions" for improvement. Let's proceed with caution, though. If something's bothering you, consider that maybe the first step shouldn't be opening your mouth but getting down on your knees instead. Pray for the person/issue you see as the problem, and pray what (if anything) you should do about it. Then you will be a lot less likely to start a fire you never intended, hurting someone in the process.

One more thing. The speaker has the responsibility to take care what s/he says, yes, but the one on the receiving end has a responsibility too. Instead of being quick to take offense, let us be teachable and quick to forgive every perceived slight. In other words, choose to snuff out the spark instead of fanning it into a destructive flame. *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!* (Psalms 133:1)

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