

FIERY TONGUE

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PREVENTION IS YOUR BEST DEFENSE

By Pastor Robert M. Reid

The Montana missions team stepped out of the Loneys' home and headed to the Yaak Community Church Vacation Bible School. Almost immediately their eyes began to sting. The smoke from forest fires in the surrounding area was so thick that the mountain vistas, so prominent the day before, were now barely visible. The smell was there too—something like the comforting aroma of fireplace smoke that fills a neighborhood on a cold winter's evening. However, on this occasion the aroma was not comforting, but alarming. The smell was carried along on brisk winds, with temperatures in the high 90s, and just twenty percent humidity. Combined with the dry conditions that held on through most of July, this was a formula for a major forest fire.

At the church the VBS volunteers were nursing cups of morning coffee. The discussion today centered on the fires. One worker said, "I heard the fires were near Whitefish, with wildfires in the Glacier National Park. Some over the border in Canada, too." Another offered, "Heard there was a small one, couple hundred acres, just west of here a couple of mountains over." Then the discussion turned to firefighting crews from the area that might be dispatched and to preparations they had made in case of mandatory evacuation. Someone would open the corral and let their horses loose to fend for themselves. Another talked about important papers that he had gathered together in a metal box in case he had to make a hasty exit. One person said she had made sure her gas tank was topped off. They were taking the danger seriously.

Already the National Forest Service had issued Stage II restrictions on the use of the forest. Logging was restricted, as were campfires and smoking. Between 1:00 PM and 1:00 AM construction was prohibited. So was operating any internal combustion engine or using motorized vehicles off designated roads and trails. The threat of fire was so great that a wayward spark was seen as a tremendous hazard. Seeing the devastation from forest fires has made the people of northwest Montana extremely cautious about them. They take precautions to prevent

them, and they make preparations in case one should flare up.

How concerned are you and I with the fires we might spark? "What fires?" you might ask. The Epistle of James warns of a fire started not by a spark on a parched forest floor, but in the moist mouth where the tongue is. James wrote,

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell...no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. 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 blessings and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way (James 3:5-10).

How much damage a critical tongue has done to families and churches! What devastation an abusive tongue has inflicted on a family member by an out-of-control believer, who for the moment has allowed their tongue to be controlled by the old nature rather than the Spirit of God. How long will the wounds from a ridiculing tongue take to heal in a person who has been slashed by demeaning words? Will the marks made by a slanderous tongue be covered by time? Can discouragement induced by a condemning tongue be quickly reversed in a wounded heart? The tongue can do deep and long-lasting damage in lives far more than one would believe. It makes a forest fire look like a campfire!

It takes a mature person to control his or her tongue. James adds (3:2) "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." Such control comes from a person who has yielded to the Spirit and thus produces His fruit (Galatians 5:16, 22-25). When He is in control, our speech is seasoned with grace (Colossians 4:6), and our words are marked by truth and love (Ephesians 4:15). The tongue then becomes not a destructive fire, but a tool that God can use to instruct and encourage others. Perhaps we need to place a Stage II restriction upon our tongues and use them very carefully so that others are not destroyed by them.

