

## **FIRE PREVENTION** **James 3:3-10**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

October 5 – 11 is National Nuclear Medicine Week.

- And National Mental Illness Awareness Week.
- And National 4-H Week.
- And National Newspaper Week.
- And National The Magic Of Differences Week.
- And National Mystery Series Week.
- And at least six other national weeks of recognition.

And it is National Fire Prevention Week. I do not know why all these other organizations picked October 5 – 11 to be their weeks of special recognition but I do know why it is designated as National Fire Prevention Week.

It is because of the Great Chicago Fire, which occurred on October 8, 1871. This tragic inferno killed some 300 people, left 100,000 homeless and destroyed more than 17,000 structures. The origin of the fire is in dispute. One popular legend has it that Mrs. O'Leary was milking her cow when the animal kicked over a lamp, setting the O'Leary barn on fire and starting the spectacular blaze. Regardless of how the massive fire began, it swiftly took its toll, burning more than 2000 acres in 27 hours. The city of Chicago quickly rebuilt, however, and within a couple of years, residents began marking the anniversary of the Great Fire with a celebration of their successful restoration.

In 1911, intending to observe the fire's anniversary with a more serious commemoration, the Fire Marshals Association of North America decided that the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire should be observed not with festivities, but in a way that would keep the public informed about the importance of fire prevention.

When President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed the first National Fire Prevention Week, October 4 – 10 1925, he noted that in the previous year some 15,000 lives were lost to fire in the United States. Calling the loss "startling", President Coolidge's proclamation stated,

*"This waste results from the conditions which justify a sense of shame and horror; for the greater part of it could and ought to be prevented...It is highly desirable that every effort be made to reform the conditions which have made possible so vast a destruction of the national wealth".*

To this day, the National Fire Prevention Association continues to make National Fire Prevention Week a priority, working to reduce the risk of fire and the toll it takes on our society.

Today, in recognition of National Fire Prevention Week, we honor all of our emergency responders: firefighters, police officers and EMTs. If you serve us and our community in any of these capacities, would you please rise so we can recognize you?

Having been a police reserve officer, I can tell you that the police and sheriff's departments would rather prevent crime than fight it. And I am sure that firefighters would rather prevent fires than fight them. That is why fire departments were among the first organizations to make smoke detectors available to residents. That is why the fire department runs educational programs in cooperation with our schools. That is one of the main reasons that our local fire department brought their equipment out for our fall youth kick-off – so they could attract the crowd and then educate people for the purpose of preventing fires.

Are you aware that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was also interested in fire prevention? Listen to what he wrote in James 3:3-10

*<sup>3</sup> When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup> Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. <sup>5</sup> Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. <sup>6</sup> The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, <sup>8</sup> but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*<sup>9</sup> With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*

James likens the tongue to a fire. I think I know what he meant by that. On a cold day, a fire can warm us and help us to be relaxed and comfortable. Lighted candles and a fire in the fireplace can be romantic. A bonfire, hotdogs and S'mores can make for a fun evening. Fire can be very useful. But it can also be tremendously destructive.

James says that our tongues are like that. With our tongues, we can sing praises to God and we can also pronounce curses on our fellow man. With our tongues, we can compliment or criticize, encourage or discourage, build up or tear down. We can share the truth or we can

spread lies. Just like fire, our tongues can be used for purposes that are positive or negative, constructive or destructive. The choice is up to us.

For fire to burn, it needs three components; it needs fuel, heat and oxygen. And for our tongues to become the destructive fire that James warned us about, they need the same three components, too.

#### I. **FOR THE TONGUE TO BECOME A DESTRUCTIVE FIRE, THERE MUST BE FUEL**

The fuel that the tongue uses to feed its fire is varied. For instance, gossip can fuel a destructive tongue. Someone has said that great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people. Just by looking at what James wrote, I suspect that the church that he was writing to must have been full of small-minded people who gossiped about each other and tore one another apart with their tongues.

Criticism can be fuel. We don't murder, steal or strike other people. But we often assassinate fellow believers and leave destruction in our wake by the way we use our tongues. Husbands have stabbed their wives with words that are as sharp as daggers and wives have lashed out with tongues that leave lasting wounds. Parents have devastated their kids by repeated blasts of venom. Children have exploded at their parents with volleys that have leveled the family like a bomb. And churches have been destroyed by wagging tongues that have sliced, diced, and chopped people to shreds.

Snide comments can be fuel for a destructive tongue. After the singer, Karen Carpenter, died at the age of 32 due to heart failure brought on by years of fighting an eating disorder, it was revealed that her fatal obsession with her weight was triggered by a single reviewer's comment. When referring to Karen, this man called her "Richard's chubby sister." While I'm sure there were other factors that contributed to Karen Carpenter's struggles, this one comment unleashed a flurry of self-doubt, which led to her eventual disease and death. What scars do you carry because of snide remarks that you've endured? What wounds have you inflicted because of snide remarks you have made?

Fire will burn until it runs out of fuel. To stop the fires of gossip and slander and malice we have to remove the fuel. Proverbs 26:20-21 reads,

<sup>20</sup> *Without wood a fire goes out;*

*without gossip a quarrel dies down.*

<sup>21</sup> *As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,  
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*

Remove the fuel and the fire goes out. Don't spread the rumor that you heard. Don't pass on the off-color joke you heard...no matter how funny

you think it is. Don't make assumptions about other people or their motives. Don't say things that you know to be untrue. Don't run other people down.

And don't use profanity. The use of profanity is a sign of a limited vocabulary. People curse and swear when they don't know more effective words to use. A little boy was selling a lawnmower. A preacher came along and wanted to buy it and asked the boy if the mower ran. "Yes sir", said the boy. The preacher pulled and pulled on the starter rope but just couldn't get the mower started. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he said, "Son, this thing won't start." The boy said, "That's 'cause you 'gotta' cuss it." The preacher said, "Son, I'm a pastor, and I haven't cussed in 18 years." The little boy said, "You just keep on pulling that rope; it'll come back to you."

The tongue can be a destructive fire but we can stop the destruction if we refuse to fuel the fire.

## II. **FOR THE TONGUE TO BECOME A DESTRUCTIVE FIRE, THERE MUST BE HEAT**

The heat that ignites the fuel can be heightened emotion. When our emotions are running high, it is tempting to say things that are more hurtful than helpful. Our language tips us off to this. We talk about emotions being at a "fever pitch". We speak about someone being "hot under the collar." We say we are "burned up" about something. We do a "slow boil". Terms with which we are very familiar should warn us that when we are emotional, we are at risk of igniting a destructive fire with our words.

A sense of exasperation can cause our tongues to detonate an inferno. Maybe we get tired or frustrated or irritated and before we know it, we've used incendiary words that blister another person.

Exaggeration can detonate a blaze. This is especially true if we are exaggerating another person's mistakes, shortcomings or failures.

Bitterness is often a smoldering fire in our soul that can flare up and burn others who get close to us.

Jealousy can make any relationship combustible. When you allow jealousy to find a place in your heart, you are permitting a source of heat to smolder inside of you. Eventually, jealousy will inflame passions that destroy...that destroy you and the ones you love.

To prevent the destructive fire, beware of the sources of heat that ignite the fuel.

### III. FOR THE TONGUE TO BECOME A DESTRUCTIVE FIRE, THERE MUST BE OXYGEN

The heat that is within us and the fuel that it ignites are dangerous but they will not become a destructive fire unless our words are aired, circulated, spread and passed along. Just as a fire needs oxygen so it can burn, our words must be aired to become destructive.

President Calvin Coolidge once said, "I have never been hurt by anything I did not say". And Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom, wrote: "*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise*" (Proverbs 10:19).

I read this week about a woman who had a very serious throat condition. The doctor told her that her vocal cords needed total rest she was forbidden to talk for 6 months! With a husband and 6 kids, this seemed impossible, but she did what she was told. When she needed the kids she blew a whistle. Whenever she needed to communicate she wrote things on pads of paper.

After six months, her voice came back. When asked what it was like to communicate only in writing, she said this: "You'd be surprised how many notes I crumpled up and threw into the trash before I gave them to anyone. Seeing my words before anyone heard them had an effect that I don't think I can ever forget."

We may not have to write out our words but we still ought to watch our words...very, very carefully.

King David, after seeing how his words got him in trouble wrote this in Psalm 39:1, "*I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth.*"

As oxygen is to fire, so is giving vent to our feelings, circulating gossip and airing our thoughts. One of the inviolate principles of communication is that once something has been said, it cannot be unsaid. We can apologize. We can clarify. We can explain. But we cannot unsay what we've already said. So be very deliberate about what you say and make sure you really want to say it.

### CONCLUSION:

In June 2002, the Hayman fire destroyed more than 137,000 acres of beautiful mountain forest in Colorado. Smoke darkened the skies, choking residents of cities 40 miles away. Thousands of people evacuated their homes, and millions of dollars were spent fighting a blaze...that began with a single match.

The poet, Spenser, has written these few lines:

*One careless word can be a spark  
Igniting anger into flame;  
It can destroy relationships  
And bring reproach to Jesus' name.*

So what's the solution? If words can be so volatile and if our tongues can be so destructive, what are we to do? Are we to never speak again?

In James 3:8, James said, "*No man can tame the tongue.*" But it is not hopeless. No man can tame the tongue but God can. When you give your heart and life to Jesus, give him your tongue as well. And if you know you have tendency to hurt others by the things you say, make it a matter of prayer and ask God to control the fire that you cannot.

**INVITATION SONG:** #597 – "*Take My Life and Let it be Consecrated*"  
(especially verse 3 – *Take my voice and let me sing  
Always, only for my King; Take my lips and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee, Filled with messages from  
Thee.*)