

My management is always concerned in one way or another with safety. They are naturally interested in people not getting hurt, but they also have to deal with a perception problem with their bosses. This in turn flows down into the perception each of the workers has with the issue of safety. I remember one year they had a slogan contest for Fire Safety week, and offered a prize for the best one submitted. A friend of mine, somewhat of a smart-aleck, turned in the slogan: "Don't Burn!" Needless to say, it won absolutely nothing.

Fire is a greater safety issue in a way than other concerns, for it is something that can quickly grow out of control. You usually don't have that with a slippery floor or a misused ladder. The idea that it goes 'wild' is a great description of the fury of this hazard. Wildfires are responsible for the destruction of thousands of acres of timberland every year, and many times houses are lost as well. It is very difficult to stop the devastation, and it takes years for the land to heal itself.

This image is used to show the horror that can be created by not controlling our tongues: *"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. 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. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."* James 3:3-8

This is very much my problem; I don't know when to keep my mouth shut. And I have felt the heat from the wildfires that I have started, many times without meaning to at all. To emphasize the fire analogy, I remember the time I had decided to burn a box on a windy fall day. It was a small box, so I placed it in a good spot in my yard, lit it, and went into the garage to create some other mischief. Looking out the garage door I saw my neighbor, who had recently had a heart attack, running across my back yard with a rake in his hand. Believe me, this got my attention. I thought he had gone nuts! But when I looked out in the yard, the fire in the dead leaves was raging out of control into my other neighbor's yard, and was about to reach an outbuilding that they had. Well, I grabbed a rake and ran, too! It was a close thing, but we finally got out of control. I would have never forgiven myself if he had suffered a heart attack. This wildfire really showed me the potential deadliness that can be created in just a moment.

James in the passage above speaks more to accidental harm. But later, in James 4:18, he writes about slander, more of a purposeful attack. Not everyone, you see, cares about who they hurt with their sharp cutting words. Some even enjoy the power, as sort of a verbal arsonist. Like the line in the movie Apocalypse Now, they "just love the smell of napalm in the morning!" It is a matter of total war, a scorched earth policy like Sherman's march to the sea. They leave in their path a wake of destruction, like Absalom when he used foxes to set fire to Joab's field (2 Samuel 14:30ff). Of these the Psalmist says, *"Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit* (Psalms 5:9)." In the case of a real wildfire, the Jews were to make restitution (Exodus 22:6). But lives are not so easily put right again.

As James said, the tongue is very difficult to control, just like fire. I can imagine that when Moses saw the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), he may have been very concerned that it might get out of control in the dry desert brush. But God had the power and authority to be in control of this fire, and we need to put Him in control of our speech. The bit of love is the only bit that can bridle the tongue. When we are filled with God's love, then we can keep the wildfires from breaking out. As Smokey the Bear tells us, it is up to us to prevent wildfires.

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
Proverbs 15:4