

The weather service reports that this is the driest year since the 50's and the hottest year ever recorded in this country. There is every reason to think this is going to be one hell of a fire season. And that's nothing compared to campaign season. This election is promising to be a scorcher.

Every four years, I give thanks to God that I don't have TV. I don't have to suffer through a long, hot season of unrelenting campaign ads. I don't have to listen to the exaggerations and distortions, the accusations and character assassinations. It amazes me that there doesn't seem to be anything a politician won't say these days. If you're like me and you want to keep your sanity, want to hold onto a bit of Christian charity, take my advice: kill your TV from now until Thanksgiving.

I wish we could get all of this year's candidates to read the Letter of James, especially the third chapter: "How great a

forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...a world of iniquity...a restless evil, full of deadly poison." That would set a very different tone for the upcoming debates, wouldn't it?

But, let's be honest, the Letter of James wasn't written to candidates for high office. The letter was written for the likes of you and me. The fact is that the whole world, and not just Washington, is on fire. Political speech may be highly flammable but the politicians are only saying what they suspect we are thinking. Even if we turn off the TV, radio, and internet, we can't escape the fire because it burns inside of us. At some point, we have to stop blaming the politicians and take a look at the people who elect them.

We ourselves know that James is right. It's easier to tame a wild beast than it is to tame the tongue. It's apparent that our mouths have minds of their own. Just listen to our children. We no longer think that children should be seen and not heard.

We encourage them to express themselves. "Use your words," we say. Then we wonder why we can't seem to teach them when not to use their words. How long does it take for a child to learn that not every word that pops into her head needs to be said?

Yet you can't blame the kids, because I know of a lot of adults who haven't learned that lesson. Some of us long ago learned it, but as we become more advanced in years, forget it or figure we no longer need to abide by it. Whatever our age, most of us are still working on it.

Do you remember what Jesus said about what is clean and unclean? He said, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." [Matthew 15:11, 18]

Yes, we have to be very careful what we say and how we say it, because according to Jesus, our words reveal our inner

world. They are a sign of God's indwelling grace or they are a symptom of some dread disease. When we speak them, we have an effect on other souls, as well. Like a salve, our words can heal. Or like shrapnel, they can tear and wound. Whatever words we choose to say to a spouse, to a child, to a stranger, to a neighbor, those words expose some inner truth. They open a window so that others can peer into our hearts and see what is stirring in our souls.

I remember a few years ago, there was a sorry soul in Sacramento who didn't know his mic was on when he started boasting about his adulterous affairs! Sometimes it seems as if sleaze is the only thing that reaches across the aisle in politics these days! But you don't have to be a politician to have a "hot mic" moment. While not everything you say will end up on YouTube, you gotta remember, God is still watching you!

God is the one who knows our every word, discerns our every thought, and follows our every move. [Psalm 139] If

you've ever tried to keep a log of everything that you put into your mouth when you're dieting, think of God keeping a log of everything that comes out of your mouth when you're talking, from the time you get out of bed in the morning until you collapse into bed at night. Imagine having to read that back to yourself at the end of the day. Would we be embarrassed by the things we say? By the amount of time we actually spend griping and gossiping, criticizing and cursing, arguing and boasting, accusing and denying? And if some of what comes out of our mouths is "restless evil, full of deadly poison," what does that say about what is in our hearts?

Most of us, after hearing all the words we say during the course of an average day, are going to get right down on our knees and pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." [Psalm 51:10]

And then the next day, we're going to get up and wonder what can we do to keep our tongues from getting us into

trouble today? My kindergarten teacher kept a bar of soap on the sink in the back of the classroom. I remember it was yellow and had blood-red streaks on it. She told us that that was the soap she used for washing out the mouth of anyone who dared utter a bad word. We all believed her, and she never had to use it.

I don't think God has a bar of soap sitting on the sink for us. God has better methods for teaching us the wisdom from above. For starters, as the author of James says, we must "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." [2:19] How much trouble we get into because we can't get ourselves to slow down, shut up, and cool off. Where there's less wind and less heat, there's less fire.

And the fewer the words, the more impact each one has. Jesus didn't say much when Pilate questioned him and the soldiers spat on him and the mob scoffed at him. But no one will ever forget him.

We remember Jesus because he didn't fight their fire with fire. He didn't use words as weapons of war. He didn't sell out. He didn't cave in. He didn't use the same mouth to bless God and then turn right around and curse those who were made in the image of God. He had no bitter envy, no selfish ambition in his heart, so there was no temptation to boast or be false to the truth.

If we want to survive as Christians in this world today then we have to follow Jesus. If we are centered in Christ, the Living Word of God, then our words will be like him, full of grace and truth. [John 1]

To have the wisdom from above, like Jesus, you don't need very many words. If you suddenly woke up in a foreign country where you couldn't speak the language, there'd only be a few words you'd need to learn to have a perfectly good life. And these words are: "Thank you"; "I'm sorry"; and "I love you." That about covers it. "Thank you"; "I'm sorry"; "I love

you." With these words, it's impossible to start fires we can't put out, or build walls we can't tear down, or cause wounds we can't bind up. Use these words, and you will gain the wisdom from above that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

Even if your parents seldom said these words out loud, it doesn't mean that you don't need to. There's a reason God gave humans the gift of language and why Jesus is called the Word of God and not the Good Intention of God. Use these few words often in all your relationships and I promise you, a harvest of righteousness will be sown in peace for those who make peace. Thank you (for listening). I'm sorry (for being preachy). I love you (and God bless you).