



ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT WILDFIRES

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It's wildfire season again! So far, better than recent years, but there are four active blazes in the Siskiyou Mountains northwest of Redding. The McKinney Fire is massive, having spread over 60,000 acres, and is only 40% contained, as of today.

Since 1944, Smokey the Bear has been working hard to inspire Americans to prevent wildfires.

It's still a big deal, as you all know, and throughout California, local Firewise Committees are springing up among residents who are concerned for the safety of their community.

Some suggest that the increase in wildfires is due to climate change. Well, there should be no doubt that climate change is real, and we are experiencing drier seasons and higher temperatures, and, as a result, other elements of our weather patterns are also abnormal. But my guess is that such change is probably more cyclical than linear—meaning that there have been seasons like this before (anyone remember the Dust Bowl period of the American Great Plains in the early 1930s?). Probably lots of them.

To imagine that climate change is *primarily* the fault of human behavior willfully ignores that humans have only been on the planet a relatively short time (especially since most who imagine that think the earth is *billions* of years old).

It also ignores the God whom we know; He “controls the wind and the waves.”

Furthermore, to then imagine that we can “fix” the flux of nature and create a perpetually comfortable climate is to ignore both historical evidence *and* political divergence *and* the sovereignty of God. How can we imagine that we have knowledge and powers sufficient for the task, while we cannot even reliably predict the weather four days from now, let alone two decades from now, much less control it?

It is true, according to the Bible, that the first occasion of a negative impact climate change did, in fact, result from the behavior of the only two humans then on the planet. While Adam and Eve had free range of the lush and flourishing Garden of Eden, and free access to the fruit of every tree in the Garden but one, it was their choice to ignore God's instruction and make their own rules that transformed their paradise into a wasteland.

And climate change alone is certainly not responsible for wildfires; thus, the enduring campaign of Smokey the Bear. It is primarily our poor and inconsistent management of the forests that sets the stage for wildfires. (And then there is human carelessness and the occasional arsonist.) Knowing this, our government urges us to learn to better care for the vegetation around our homes.

Traditionally, Native Americans routinely set fire to the underbrush to clear the land and preserve the forests. This had the combined effect of eliminating the underbrush fuel, stimulating fresh new plant growth, enhancing the visibility of hunted game, and preserving the great woods and forests. Such clearing is no longer permitted. So...

Wildfire is God's way of managing the undergrowth that we have ignored.

Is it dangerous? Yes.

Is it painful? Yes.

But is it effective? YES!

Lack of proper land management (regularly clearing the underbrush) creates a natural tinder box. Wildfires become inevitable (It's not a question of "if," but "when.").

The Curse of Weeds

Weeds and brush are pernicious and pervasive. They are part of sin's curse on the earth.

Genesis 3:17–19

¹⁷ And to the man he said, "Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you.

All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. ¹⁸ It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."

Is there also another lesson here for us? Is there an overgrowth of "spiritual underbrush" that threatens the peace and productivity of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, and of the church?

"Thorns and thistles" or "thorns and briars" are the words chosen by most Bible translators to describe this unwanted, but pervasive, undergrowth that endangers our forests, our fields, our homes, and our hearts. Here are three samples:

Isaiah 5:4-6

^{5:4} What more can I do for my vineyard beyond what I have already done?

When I waited for it to produce edible grapes, why did it produce sour ones instead?

^{5:5} Now I will inform you what I am about to do to my vineyard:

I will remove its hedge and turn it into pasture, I will break its wall and allow animals to graze there. ^{5:6} I will make it a wasteland; no one will prune its vines or hoe its ground, and thorns and briars will grow there.

Isaiah 32:12-13

^{32:12} Mourn over the field, over the delightful fields and the fruitful vine!

^{32:13} Mourn over the land of my people, which is overgrown with thorns and briars.

Hebrews 6:7–8

⁷ When the ground soaks up the falling rain and bears a good crop for the farmer, it has God's blessing. ⁸ But if a field bears thorns and thistles, it is useless. The farmer will soon condemn that field and burn it.

God has demonstrated a pattern of managing our poor management of ourselves by clearing the deck—flooding the earth, burning the city to the ground, sending a plague, killing all the firstborn, etc.—and starting over (because *He* can start from nothing). Don't provoke Him in this way.

The preventive answer is to better manage our fields and forest floors, regularly clearing them of weeds and brush. This is especially true of the human soul. Learn to examine yourself, in contrast to ignoring the growth of weeds.

Examine Yourself

1 Corinthians 11:17–32

¹⁷ But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. ¹⁸ First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who (think you) have God's approval will (stand out and) be recognized!

²⁰ When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. ²¹ For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. ²² What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? (You're not starving!) Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!

²³ For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord Himself. On the night when He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread ²⁴ and gave thanks to God for it. Then He broke it in pieces and said, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” ²⁵ In the same way, He took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and His people—an agreement confirmed with My blood. Do this in remembrance of Me as often as you drink it.” ²⁶ For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until He comes again.

²⁷ So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ That is why YOU SHOULD EXAMINE YOURSELF before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

³¹ But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. ³² Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

Most church meals are not about feeding the starving, but about encouraging the fellowship of Christ’s followers. The food is secondary to the fellowship. That’s why Paul implied that “hurrying to eat, without sharing with others” was out of place in the assembly of believers. He indicated that such behavior is a “disgrace to the church” and it “shames the poor” among us. *No praise for this!*

Then, after introducing the bread and the cup that would become our regular Communion Meal, Paul challenges us all to “examine ourselves,” lest we participate in an unworthy manner—that is, ignoring the love and fellowship of our church family.

Pushing to the front of the line or overloading my plate before everyone has been served dishonors our fellowship in Christ. Your participation is only valid if it “honors the body of Christ.”

If we dishonor the church in such a way, we invite God to judge us for our selfish lack of love. Paul said that common evidences of such judgment include weakness, sickness, and even death. While feebleness, infirmity, and death do not *always* indicate such an issue, sometimes they do.

Paul explained that such divine judgment is temporal, not permanent, and is designed as discipline to motivate our repentance and protect us from God’s condemnation.

So, Paul cautioned us: *“But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way.”*

Thank God! There is something you can do to *prevent* such a disciplinary response: examine yourself. Take the time to examine the underbrush in your life. Has it grown to a threatening level? Are you in danger of a fire breaking out and consuming more than you want to lose?

Take a deep breath. Focus your thoughts, and examine yourself.

- Do I love the Lord Jesus more than anyone else?
- Is there anything that I have held back from Him, or covered in pretense (as though He could not see through it)?
- Do I love the brothers and sisters, as He commanded me?
- Have I frankly repented of my sins?
- Do I obey what the Lord tells me, or do I make my own rules?

And so on...

This is how you, and only you, can prevent wildfires.

What becomes of the “undergrowth” in our lives that we choose to ignore? It’s the nature of weeds to grow, relentlessly. Without attentive management, they will take over, choking out the fruiting plants, and making kindling for a wildfire.

Deal with the Weeds

What weeds am I referring to? What are the “thorns and briars” that plague the human spirit?

Colossians 3:5–10

⁵ So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don’t be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. ⁶ Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. ⁷ You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. ⁸ But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. ⁹ Don’t lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. ¹⁰ Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.

Or, as Peter summarized it, *“Intentionally love one another, from the heart.”* (1 Peter 1:22)

There is no more room here for unforgiveness, bitterness, jealousy, or apathy. If you let the weeds grow up, if you don’t manage the forest floor... God will manage it for you, but it will be more difficult than doing the work yourself.

Manage the forest floor of your life by taking charge of your *thinking*. How you choose to occupy your mind will determine your feelings, your attitude, your speech, and your behavior.

Have faith in Christ. Take control of your thoughts. And do what is right.

Philippians 4:8–9

⁸ And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. ⁹ Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

And remember this sage advice:

Only You Can Prevent Wildfires

This morning, dear friends, I call you to repentance.

You've ignored the weeds and underbrush, and they have grown dangerously high and thick.

- Unforgiveness lingers...
- Grudges grow heavy...
- You've ignored those you're supposed to treasure...
- Lustful thoughts have gone unchecked...
- You crave things, but ignore God's Spirit...
- You think vulgarity is cool...
- And your tongue has wounded like a sword...
- You have lied, instead of trusting the truth.

Don't ignore the message you've heard. The Spirit of Jesus has spoken to you today. Now, it's time for you to respond.

Tell God you're sorry. Ask Him to help you make changes. Come, and seek His face.

Psalms 51:10–12

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a loyal spirit within me.

*¹¹ Do not banish me from Your presence,
and don't take Your Holy Spirit from me.*

*¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
and make me willing to obey You.*

*¹⁵ Unseal my lips, O Lord,
that my mouth may praise You.*

*¹⁷ The sacrifice You desire is a broken spirit.
You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.*

Determine to apologize frankly and fully. Humble yourself beneath the mighty hand of God, and He will lift you up.

In this way, together, let's cast out weakness, overcome sickness, and avert death. Set a cleansing fire to the underbrush and clear the forest floor once more. Make a clear path for the Lord. He is coming to you.