

# A **Wildfire** of Words

More than a thousand firefighters battled a wildfire for two weeks in the Black Hills of South Dakota in the year 2000.

The fire started on Aug. 24 of that year, and was not contained until Sept. 8. Meanwhile, more than 80,000 acres of valuable timber burned.

Janice Stevenson, 46, was arrested on suspicion of starting the fire. She pleaded guilty to second-degree arson, was sentenced to 25 years in the South Dakota State Penitentiary, and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$42,204,155.48.

Federal investigators who filed charges against Stevenson say she admitted to stopping along Highway 16 west of Custer on Aug. 24, lighting a cigarette, and tossing the still-burning match on dry grass and pine needles. The resulting blaze blackened 130 square miles of the Black Hills National Forest, cost \$9 million to fight, and racked up \$42 million in damages.

“Rather than putting out the fire,” an affidavit said, “she looked at it and decided to leave the area.”



There is a spiritual application to this story.

Like starting a forest fire, producing a “wildfire” with our tongues requires little effort. Rumors, half-truths, grumblings, sarcastic remarks and hurtful things said in the heat of anger all have the potential for burning down office morale, family peace and unity within the neighborhood, church or community at large.

The Bible cautions us about our speech.

James 3:3-5 (NKJV): “We put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so, the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!”

The Apostle Paul advises: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29 ESV).

These are words fitly spoken. Folks generally are uncomfortable in the presence of those who use coarse and critical language, but delight in the presence of people who speak the truth in love and kindness.