

NUMBERS 6:1-8 WHERE'S THE FIRE?

Sometimes you are having a conversation, and a statement, a phrase, or even a word tears through all the other words, and strikes you in the heart.

Not long ago, I was talking with someone about a certain aspect of our ministry here, and this person asked, "Where's the fire?"

Where's the fire, in this place? Where is the passion in our hearts, as individuals, and as a body, for what God has called us to be and to do here?

As we read through the Old Testament this year, we have reached the book of Numbers. God's people are preparing to enter the "Promised Land."

In chapter 6, the Lord instructs Moses about people who want to be "on fire" for the Lord. He describes something we know as the "Nazirite vow."

If someone wants to make such a vow for a season of life, he or she must...

- 1) Abstain from wine, other fermented drink, or even anything that comes from the grapevine.
- 2) Use no razor on his or her head. (This would seem to apply to the men, more than the women!)
- 3) Not go near a dead body - even the dead body of a close relative.
- 4) Present a series of offerings to the Lord, when the period for the vow is over.

Obviously, we live in a different time and different place! Even today, we are not sure of the significance of these precise requirements. But we can be pretty sure of the heart of these requirements. It is a heart that is on fire for the Lord.

Where's the fire? Young people, I want to especially encourage you to ponder that question, today and in the days to come. You are in a time of your lives when you are forming habits that will shape the rest of your life. Where is your fire? Where is your passion? Is it for the Lord?

Yet I do not ask just the young people. I ask everyone here, who names Jesus as Savior and Lord. Where's the fire?

Maybe you are just SMOLDERING.

When a fire is smoldering, something is there. Something is burning. But it is very hard to see. You have to hunt and peck and poke, to see a flame.

We tend to smolder in our devotion to the Lord. Why?

I believe we tend to keep the flame low, because the flames around us are low. We tend to burn no more brightly, than the people around us.

This is important, because I believe these words relate more to the religious culture among us, than the unbelieving culture around us.

Yes, the Lord calls his people to be separated from whatever wrong values or practices they see in the broken culture around them. But I think the Lord also wants his people to separate themselves from a religious culture that does little more than smolder.

This is not just about taking a different path than the unbelievers around us. This is about being willing to take a different path than even some of the believers around us.

What is this smoldering all about? What is "down there" in us, that keeps us smoldering, instead of burning?

Let me describe this smoldering with several phrases that may never come from our lips, but could be present in our hearts.

Here is the first: "*I WILL SIT.*"

This is the smoldering of passivity. I see serving the Lord as a good thing - for other people. I am glad to see the pastors serving the Lord. Or maybe I am glad to see the really "religious" people serving the Lord.

But like so many around me, I am content to watch. I am like the man before the TV with a channel-chaser, or before his computer with a mouse. I'm passive. I will sit.

Here is another smoldering statement: "*I WILL DO JUST ENOUGH.*"

This is the smoldering of minimalism. I will keep a scorecard on my life with God. I will do just enough to keep that "ogre in the sky" from getting upset with me and causing me problems.

I will get to church...just enough. I will show up at events...just enough. I will behave at school...just enough. I will cooperate with my parents or my spouse...just enough.

A third smoldering statement: "*I AM NOT SO BAD.*"

I look around, and I see another young person who is really messed up. Or I look around, and I see a marriage that is really falling apart, or guys who really have a problem with gambling, or pornography, or girls who really gossip, or women who really have messed up boyfriends or husbands...

And on and on and on. I am not so bad.

More words of smoldering: *"I AM OKAY."*

This is when I have looked around, and I have seen that I am not so bad, on the outside. But I think only of the outside - what people see.

I am following the "law." I am obeying the rules. I am conforming. I am staying out of trouble. And that is okay, because I am okay.

I mean, what more do you want? What more does God want from me? I am okay, aren't I?

Then one more phrase of smoldering: *"I WANT TO BE LIKED."*

Young people, you may think I offer this one just for you, but I offer this for all of us. We all want to be liked. We all want others to think well of us. None of us want to seem "wierd", or "odd", or "strange." Even last Sunday, I used the phrase "peculiar people", and maybe you cringed or rolled your eyes.

I don't want to be one of those. I want to fit in. I want to be just like everybody else.

So I won't say anything about "religion." I will go along with whatever is fine with others - in the classroom or in the boardroom. I will speak, and I will dress, and I will buy, and I will do, so that people will like me.

"I will sit." "I will do just enough." "I am not so bad." "I am okay." "I want to be liked."

Which phrase or phrases describes you? Maybe you can think of a few that I did not mention. You are smoldering. Something is there, but no one can see it, because it is hidden in the depths of words like these, written on our hearts. Smoldering.

Yet sometimes fires smolder, and sometimes fires produce smoke. You can see the smoke better than the smoldering, but the smoke does not provide the heat you want to feel, or the flame you want to see.

SMOKING. What is happening in a heart or life that is not smoldering or burning, but smoking? Let's listen to two statements.

The first is, *"I WILL BE GOOD ENOUGH."*

This is righteousness by works. I know God is good, and I know God wants me to be good, so I will be good, so the good God will know how good I am, and tell me how good I am.

I will not be like those smolderers. I will take this vow of separation. I will stand out from the crowd with my religiosity.

I will memorize more Bible verses. I will pray longer and longer and longer. I will always be there when the church door is open. I will always help with all kinds of activities.

I will deny myself the pleasures of life. I will stay away from anything or anyone that could possibly corrupt me in any way, shape or form. I will talk to five people about Jesus today.

I will. I will. I will.

This is the heart of religiosity. It may all be good stuff, but it is all done for the wrong reason. I will work my way to God. I will be good enough.

You won't be good enough. You can't be good enough. You may think you are being good enough, but you are not.

But maybe it is not only God you are trying to impress. Another smoking statement is this: *"I WILL BE BETTER THAN YOU."*

This is pride. I will do all that I do, so I can be sure that you know, how much better I am.

I think of fourth grade. In those days, as in these days, our teachers wanted kids to learn to love reading. In my fourth grade class, our teacher put up a cloth picture of a football field, and she gave us little felt footballs with our names on them, she told us that for every book we read, we could advance our balls ten yards down the field. Ten books...touchdown!

I scored eight touchdowns that year. I scored more touchdowns than anybody else in my fourth-grade class. Isn't it amazing that I remember that, but I can't remember what my wife said to me ten minutes ago?

Pride. I will be better than you.

"I will be good enough." "I will be better than you."

It's all smoke. It's not fire.

Let me remind you again, as Dale and I have reminded you, and as we will remind you all through our reading of the Old Testament: God's call to holiness is a response to his mercy. God gives mercy to undeserving people. Then God calls them to live holy lives. First he provides, then we respond.

I cannot be good enough for God. My relationship with him is rooted in his grace to me, not my works for him.

I am not better than others. If I live well or serve well, it is because he has poured out his mercy to me.

I am saved by grace, not by works. I grow by grace, not in my own strength. If I think otherwise, I am just blowing smoke.

Where's the fire? Would God work in you, in me, in us, so that we are BURNING? Do you yearn for that?

Have you seen the commercial, where the women declare, “I am hungry, and I am not going to starve myself anymore?”

You see a woman with a rice cake, and she declares, “I am hungry, and I am not going to starve myself anymore!”

You see a woman with a piece of tropical fruit on a dry cracker. She declares, “I am hungry, and I am not going to starve myself anymore!”

You see a woman with some other paltry meal, and she declares, “I am hungry, and I am not going to starve myself anymore!” Then she hurls that paltry plate over the side of the balcony where she is eating.

What is burning all about? It is when we say, “I am hungry, and I am not going to starve myself anymore! I am hungry for the Lord. I am tired of the smoldering and smoking all around me, even among God’s people.

“I want something better. I want to be excellent for the Lord. I want to be burning for him. Not so he will love me, and not so I can prove myself better than others. I long to do this, because I love this One who has done so much for me.”

Remember the words of verse 2: this is a vow of separation “to the Lord.” This vow grows from a love for the Lord.

As one author writes, “The Nazirite vow was not just an act of superior self-discipline, an achieving of spiritual machismo; it was to be regarded as a supreme act of total devotion to the person and work of the Lord that would override certain normal and expected patterns of behavior.”

In our religious culture, smoldering and smoking are normal and expected. But God calls his people to cry, “Where’s the fire?” He calls his people to a burning desire for him, and for his glory, that is “abnormal” and “unexpected” by the religious people of the day.

So what does this burning look like? If I do not abstain from wine, let my hair grow, or avoid dead bodies, and if I know I need not offer a sacrifice of animals for my sins, because Jesus Christ has sacrificed himself for all of my sins, how can I separate myself from the religious culture around me?

Let’s think first of the first part of the vow: stay away from wine, fermented drink, or even anything from the grapevine.

This is not a call for all believers to forever abstain from alcohol! This is a voluntary vow, and the vow to stay away shows us that it was okay to drink alcohol, in moderation, when you were not under this vow.

But what is the problem with alcohol? What is the issue with all sorts of consumption? How do we abuse all the blessings we enjoy?

We do not exercise self-control. Our desires become our masters, and soon we are smoldering or smoking, instead of burning.

So one phrase that could describe this vow for our day would be this: “*I WILL MASTER MY DESIRES.*”

On the last day of Mardi Gras this week, I briefly heard the words of a woman in New Orleans, who rejoiced in the fun of Mardi Gras by saying, “This is a chance for us to be ourselves!”

What am I? Who are you?

I am a child of God. I have been bought for himself, at the price of the blood of Jesus. As Paul writes often, I have been given this grace, so that I might put away my former way of life, and live a new life, where I am master of my desires, instead of my desires mastering me.

The religious culture around me says, “Do whatever you want!” But I will separate myself from that and say, “Because of the grace of Jesus, and by the grace of Jesus, I will master my desires.”

* I will master my desire, to use my tongue to destroy others. I will stop speaking to hurt, and start speaking to help, even if I lose friends who want to use their words only to tear down others.

* I will master my desire, to get what I want, by dealing dishonestly with others. I will speak the truth, even when it hurts, and even if I must suffer the pain and humiliation of confessing my sins to others.

* I will master my desire, to misuse others sexually, by living in sexual impurity, outside of marriage. I will do this, even if I lose a relationship I really want.

* I will master my desire, to acquire and acquire and acquire. I will do this, even if I do not have all the comforts and status symbols that people around me possess.

Desires are not bad. But part of my separation, is mastering them, instead of letting them master me.

Let’s think more about the vow. What is this about not using a razor? We do not know for sure. But think of what would happen when that person started to let that hair grow. He would look different.

It would be a visual sign. It would be a sign for all to see, that this person was separated for service to the Lord.

There is danger here. Jesus warns of making a show of your alleged service to the Lord.

But there is also opportunity here. God’s people are called to show the world that they are his. I want to demonstrate on the outside, the heart that burns on the inside, for my Lord.

So this phrase will be on my heart: “*I WILL TESTIFY TO MY LORD.*”

I am often reminded of the story of the man who was approached by an evangelist. "Are you a Christian?" asked the evangelist.

The man told the evangelist to wait a few minutes. He soon returned with a piece of paper.

"This is a list of my friends," he said. "Go ask them."

The religious culture around me says, "Fit in! Be like others!" But I will separate myself from that and say, "Because of the grace of Jesus, and by the grace of Jesus, I will testify to my Lord."

* I will testify to my Lord, as I follow the footsteps of the Savior who came not to be served, but to serve. I will offer my hands for the good of the people in my home, my school, my workplace...wherever God calls me.

* I will testify to my Lord, as I speak of right and wrong, even when I am the only one who knows right is right, and wrong is wrong. I will do this even if I lose respect, and even relationships.

* I will testify to my Lord, as I help those who testify. Maybe I will serve in missions, instead of seeking the comfort of vacation. Maybe I will support missions and missionaries, with my time, my prayers, or my wealth.

Maybe, as a young person, I will hold in my heart, the notion that God may call me to give my life to full-time missions service.

* I will testify to my Lord, as I make the effort to listen to that person whose heart is heavy with the cares of this world. I will strive to be patient, so that person can see the patience of Jesus. I will offer compassion, so that person can sense the compassion of Jesus. I will bring wisdom, so that person can experience the wisdom of Jesus.

"I will master my desires." "I will testify to my Lord."

Then a bit more about this vow, as I seek a life of burning for the Lord.

The vow calls for the Nazirite to stay away from dead bodies - even the dead bodies of close relatives. What is that all about?

Once again, we do not know for sure, but notice this, here and elsewhere in the Old Testament. Those bodies rendered you "ceremonially unclean". In other words, you could not enter worship.

We praise God that in our day, Jesus has removed the barriers that keep us from worship. We can now approach the throne of God with confidence.

But maybe our problem is that we have always been able to approach too freely, and too easily. Maybe we do not value worship as we should.

One Christian author writes, "Worship is the whole point of everything. It is the purpose of history, the goal of the whole Christian story.

"Worship is not one segment of the Christian life among others. Worship is the entire Christian life..."

We gather to worship one day a week, so we may go and worship all the days of the week.

The religious culture around me says, "Worship is nice, when nothing else gets in the way." But I will separate myself from that and say, "Because of the grace of Jesus, and by the grace of Jesus, I will worship at all costs."

* I will worship at all costs, by myself. I may lose sleep. I may lack energy. I may miss something fun. I may have to take a close look at my life, and that may be challenging. But I must meet with my Lord, if I am going to walk with my Lord.

* I will worship at all costs, with my family. It will take work. It will take a change in priorities. It may take different forms. Maybe it is as simple as reading a bit of the Word, and praying together. But before all else, I am a worshipper, and I must lead the people in my care, to worship.

* I will worship at all costs, with God's people. I will not allow all of the obstacles and distractions of my culture or my daily life to stop me from this season of offering myself to the Lord, in the presence of others. I will give up what is less important, so I may offer the worship that is so important.

I will do this, because I know that apart from this, I will smolder or smoke. I will not burn.

I want something better. I do not want to follow along in the lukewarm, mediocre, invisible, unthreatening, meaningless, toothless, harmless, rootless, soulless, culture of religiosity which surrounds and suffocates me. I want to burn for the Savior who died for me and has raised me to new life.

This will not be easy. This will not be comfortable. This will be costly. But I remind myself again and again, that I seek this "fire" because of the grace of Jesus, and by the grace of Jesus.

I also know this. At the end of these sometimes obscure words about the Nazirite vow, I read this.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.'

So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

I read this, and I know that if I burn for the Lord, I will sacrifice. I may suffer. But I will know that I have

the name of the Lord upon me, and that means I will know the Lord's blessing, in a way I do not know it, when I am merely smoldering or smoking.

Where's the fire?

Where's the fire, for our youth, and in our youth?

Where's the fire, for the work of missions?

Where's the fire, for the lost in our community?

Where's the fire, for heartfelt fellowship?

Where's the fire, for the glory of Yahweh?

Where's the fire, for the Savior whose body and blood, has quenched the fire of God's wrath, and secured a forever of God's blessing?

Holy Spirit, send the blessing of your fire, that we may know the blessings that you will burn into our hearts and lives, as we burn for our Savior.