

A Harvest of Righteousness: *James 3*

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In February of this year, the New York Times Magazine published a story entitled, “[How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco’s Life](#).” For those of you who need a social media primer: a “tweet” is a short message users can make on the social media website Twitter.

In this article, the author, Jon Robinson, tells Sacco’s story: “As she made the long journey from New York to South Africa, to visit family during the holidays in 2013, Justine Sacco, 30 years old and the senior director of corporate communications at IAC (an American media and internet company), began tweeting...little jokes about the indignities of travel. There was one about a fellow passenger on the flight from John F. Kennedy International Airport:

“ ‘Weird German Dude: You’re in First Class. It’s 2014. Get some deodorant.’...”

“Then, during her layover at Heathrow: ‘Chilly — cucumber sandwiches — bad teeth. Back in London!’

And then there was this tweet, sent on December 20th, before her final leg of her trip to Cape Town: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”

Robinson writes, “She chuckled to herself as she pressed send on this last one, then wandered around Heathrow’s international terminal for half an hour, sporadically checking her phone. No one replied, which didn’t surprise her. She had only 170 Twitter followers.” Then she boarded the plane, and shut her phone off.

11 hours later, after she landed in Cape Town, she turned her phone back on.

“Right away, she got a text from someone she hadn’t spoken to since high school: ‘I’m so sorry to see what’s happening.’ Sacco looked at it, baffled.

“Then another text: ‘You need to call me immediately.’ It was from her best friend, Hannah. Then her phone exploded with more texts and alerts. And then it rang. It was Hannah. ‘You’re the No. 1 worldwide trend on Twitter right now,’ she said. Sacco’s Twitter feed had become a horror show.”

Maybe you remember seeing her story on the news last year. A tip led a blogger on the website Gawker, to link to Sacco’s tweet. He could not resist a Public Relations manager for a major media company tweeting a racist attempt at humor. So he shared.

And in a moment, the internet was set on fire. People all over the world were talking about Justine Sacco, publicly shaming her for what she said.

We can imagine James hearing this story and responding by saying, “Not many of you should become teachers.” Maybe today he’d substitute “teachers” with “public relations managers” or “politicians” or “preachers” or “media personalities”. When you speak for a living, you must watch what you say. One mistake, and your public life could be over.

In James’ day, to set the world on fire, you had to be there, say the word to someone’s face. Speak it to a gathered crowd. You could change the world, but it took some effort. But today...today, with a few strokes of your fingers or thumbs, your words can be tweeted and retweeted to millions, far beyond your control.

We live in a time where words are plentiful. Spoken and written, in print and digital. On billboards and screens, on 24-hour news cycles and TV show after TV show. Everywhere, words! Which begs the question, Why would you, in your right mind, spend your day off coming here to speak, sing and listen to even more words?!

Words are everywhere, and when words are plentiful, words are cheap. Perhaps it’s no accident that we’ve been given this text right in the middle of a Presidential Election cycle. We here in Iowa are blessed to be on the front lines of the word-assault, as candidate after candidate speak so many words. And yes, most of the time, their words seem empty, but empty words can still be very powerful.

When oil is in abundance, gas is cheap. But cheap gas can set fires just as easily as costly gas.

But what’s the big deal? I thought we were taught as a child that old playground rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It’s catchy, words that have been passed down from parent to child for who knows how long. There’s only one problem: It’s a bold-faced lie.

I broke my arm when I was 6, fractured my humerus bone right in two. I remember it. I know it hurt. But I can’t remember the pain. But hurtful words spoken to me decades ago--I can still feel their burn like it was yesterday.

Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can hurt you for a lifetime.

I think the monks who take vows of silence are onto something. How easy it is for our words, intentional or accidental, to set a forest on fire. We’d might as well not speak at all.

But that’s not James’ advice, is it? At first, it sounds like he’s telling us all to shut up. The tongue is too powerful. Don’t risk it. But the tongue is like a bridle, he says. Or, if horses aren’t your thing, it’s like a rudder on a ship. Or like a flame of fire.

A bridle, in and of itself, cannot direct a horse, nor can a rudder move a ship or a flame start a fire. A bridle needs reins in the hands of a rider. A Rudder needs a tiller in the hands of a captain. And a flame needs to be placed upon something flammable.

And a tongue? Well, a tongue needs wisdom. Wisdom that can guide it, shape the words it forms.

Wisdom shapes the tongue into words worth speaking.

James isn't asking us to shut off the springs of our mouths, he's asking us to clean up the streams. To speak wisely. And before you hear James wrong, he's not talking about dirty jokes or saying curse words, or, at least, not primarily.

His real concern is people who use words to set things on fire.

It's easy to see it happen when it's a presidential candidate or a 30 year-old woman making a bad joke on Twitter. We like it when their tongues set things on fire, because it takes the attention away from us.

But we do it, too. We use gossip and slander to tear people down. We complain much more than we praise. Words that tear down; spoken out of anger. Words that hurt.

James reminds us of the power of our words--all our words. It is a power that certainly must be put in check, but a power that cannot just be abandoned. For our words are powerful, and with the wisdom from above, can--indeed--change the world.

Words that are pure and filled with peace. Words that are filled with mercy and good fruit. Words that have no partiality, no racist edges, no judgmental spears. Words that are genuine, not hypocritical. These words, set loose on the fields of the world, will not burn the field down, but will produce on that field a harvest of righteousness.

Words like, I love you. I do. I forgive you. Welcome home.

Words like, I'm sorry. God loves you. All are welcome here.

Words like, mercy and grace. Kindness and unconditional love.

Words like, no matter who you are, or what you've done, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Words like, Come and see. Words like, This is my body.

Words like, Christ has risen. Christ has risen, indeed!

These words, once spoken, have before and will again and always set the the world on fire in a harvest of righteousness.

So, bridle your tongues. Speak wisely. Just because you think it, doesn't mean you say it. But more than that--use your words to set fires of peace and love, grace and mercy.

Let there be peace on earth. And let it begin with me.

Though I may speak with bravest fire,
And have the gift to all inspire,
And have not love, my words are vain,
As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

But what would happen if all of us--all of God's children--spoke love and peace into this world?

I'll tell you what would happen.

The whole world would be ablaze with the love of Christ.

Amen.