

According to Wikipedia, Twitter is an American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets." It was founded in 2006 and currently has over 321 million users. One of the unique features of Twitter is that posted messages need to be short- originally limited to 140 characters, now expanded to 280. President Trump has used the service effectively to communicate his messages and policies directly to voters.

But many people have noticed that tweets and other social media postings have become increasingly angry and aggressive, often attacking people personally. They reflect and feed a larger issue in our culture of people embracing a rage-filled style of communication. This style often demonizes opponents, casting them not just as wrong, but as evil and harmful to society. And to some degree this style works, as tweets using heated words such as "wrong" or "shameful" are 20% more likely to go viral. But at what cost?

A recent article in the [Atlantic](#) referred to the "dark psychology of social networks." That's a pretty good description. Often these networks encourage and feed our baser instincts, but do little to further any constructive action that would address our real concerns for the common good. And our politicians and media commentators stoke our anger in

order to manipulate us for their own ends. It all simply feeds our rage, making us angrier and angrier, and driving us further and further apart. This polarizing result, of course, is antithetical to God's desire for his Creation.

So, how are Christians supposed to live in such a Twitter world? I think these brief words from the biblical book of James can be an excellent guide for us. ¹⁹*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;* ²⁰*for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.* (James 1:19,20) Talk about a counter-cultural message! And it becomes even more counter-cultural when we reflect on it a little bit more. Let's break it down.

James says we should be "quick to listen." That little phrase contains several assumptions. First, it assumes that the other person has real value- that they are worth listening to. In the world of social-networking where people are often anonymous, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the people who are posting are real, feeling, flesh-and-blood human beings- creatures made in the very image of God, and therefore deserving of our respect. As C.S. Lewis remarked in his address, "The Weight of Glory," "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit- immortal horrors or everlasting splendours." We should be quick to

listen to others because they are specially created to be like God himself and therefore have great worth.

Being quick to listen also assumes that we have enough humility to believe we can learn something from someone else! Humility is a core Christian virtue, sadly missing from much of our conversation today. James knows that we need it, because we are all limited, finite beings who need the points of view of other people to gain a fuller understanding of life. That's another reason we need to be quick to listen. We need the observations and opinions of others.

Listening also requires having a sense of empathy for the situations, experiences, and beliefs of others. The command to love our neighbor comes into play here. We need to listen well enough to understand the concerns of others and to try and put ourselves in their place.

When I was a youth director, I served a church just outside of Washington, D.C. under Rev. Dick Hutcheson, an experienced pastor who took on hot button issues from time to time in his sermons. It frankly scared me to death whenever he did it! I feared it would divide our congregation. But Dick always made it a point to study opposing points of view and show in his sermon that he understood and empathized with various opinions. Only then would he share his own conclusions on a given matter. And generally, people were willing to listen to what he had to

say when they knew he understood and respected their point of view. Being quick to listen can open up the potential for constructive engagement on the issues. That is unlikely to happen without it.

And, that's just the first part of James' admonition! James also says we should be slow to speak. I love a quote usually attributed to Mark Twain, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt." Or, consider these words from Proverbs 13, "*Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin.*" (Prov. 13:3) The importance of guarding our words is a major theme of James' letter. He says that if we think we're religious, but don't control our speech, we're kidding ourselves. He likens an out-of-control tongue to a great fire, causing all kinds of destruction, a destruction magnified beyond his wildest dreams with the advent of social networks. Columba Stewart, an American Benedictine monk, puts it like this, "Language is a gift that can be used thoughtfully or thoughtlessly, humbly or proudly. Someone constantly aware of the presence of God will know when and how to speak." Or, how to Tweet! Be slow to speak.

Finally, James warns us about anger. "Be... *slow to anger;*²⁰*for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*" (James 1:19b, 20) It appears that unchecked anger is behind a lot of the destructive speech and writing in our society today. Have you noticed that many people seem to

be looking for things to be offended about? Why is that? What's the payoff? On one level, being angry can feel good; it can make us feel powerful. And it can also give us a sense of righteousness- that we are good and important people because we're angry over the right things. And our anger can make us feel that we are more righteous than others!

In earlier times, Christians regarded anger with suspicion and caution. After all, it's one of the seven deadly sins. It leads to all kinds of destructiveness, both for the angry person and those on whom the anger is vented. Jesus likened it to murder! But today, anger is so widespread that in David Powlison's book, Good and Angry, he devotes a chapter to the question, "Do you have an anger problem?" When you get to that chapter, you find that it cleverly consists of one word- "Yes!"

There are many causes of anger- hurt and frustration come immediately to mind. But it is a caustic emotion that the Bible warns us needs to be handled with great care. This stands in contrast to the Twitter rages and other destructive communication that is so common today. And James reminds us that all of this anger does not produce God's righteousness, no matter how just our cause may be!

So, how should Christians live in a Twitter world? Here are a few thoughts.

1. Remember the big picture. In the Lord's Prayer we pray for God's

kingdom to come on earth. Such a kingdom is concerned about the common good, about making progress toward resolving our social ills, about healing our hurts and injustices. Before sending a tweet or making a comment in conversation, ask yourself if your contribution is working toward God's kingdom, or if it's just an opportunity to vent your frustration, or make yourself look good to those who think like you do.

2. Deal with conflict in the appropriate forum. A personal conflict should not be addressed on Facebook or Twitter or in a letter to the editor or by talking about it with other people! Personal conflicts should be addressed in person, one on one. If that fails, a neutral third party might help, or a trained mediator or counselor. Deal with conflict in a manner that maximizes the chances of healing and peace.

3. Get help with your anger. If you are not making progress with your anger on your own, talk with someone who can help you- a friend or pastor or counselor might be a good place to start. This is a tough time to have an anger problem, given the rivers of rage running all around us, so get the help you need. Otherwise, you'll inevitably cut yourself off from those around you, and eventually from those who care about you.

4. If you find that you are still unable to listen well, speak slowly,

and deal with your anger in a healthy way, consider taking a break from things that fuel your anger- social media, and perhaps even the news for a while. Perhaps a break will give you a chance to re-set.

5. Finally, consider the possibility that God has placed you on social media or in face-to-face groups of people to be a force for reconciliation. What could you do and say that would bring peace and understanding to a conversation?

The challenges facing Christians in a Twitter world are unique to our time, but the biblical admonitions to listen well, speak slowly, and refrain from angry responses will still work well for us today.