

We are in week two of our series called “How to Ruin Your Life.” Last week, we talked about how to fail at applying wisdom to your life, and on the other hand, how to truly live a successful life with wisdom as your companion and not just as a quick solution.

This week, I’m going to show you four different ways you can start a fire with your phone. I want to talk about how we can sometimes cause destruction without even knowing it, by making poor choices through text and social media.

Before I continue, I think there might be a couple of reasons why some of you are already planning on not listening. Some of you might not have a phone or even use social media. But the wisdom that I’m going to be presenting today actually carries over to how you speak and act every day, so if you don’t have a phone or don’t use social media, everything I’m about to say applies to you, too.

Others of you may not be planning on listening because we’re trying to relate an ancient Bible to modern technology. You might be wondering when the Apostle Paul needed help sending a tweet or when did King David gave wisdom on which emoji to send in a crisis.

Although you’re right in thinking that technology and ancient Bible characters have nothing in common, what they *do* have in common is they both involve average people reacting emotionally in certain situations. In fact, historians, psychologists and philosophers have done extensive research on people throughout history, and they’ve come up with a phenomenon they call the “hedonic treadmill.” You know what a treadmill is, right? It’s that thing that you’re supposed to run on indoors, but instead you end up using it to launch shoes at your cat.

Picture a treadmill going one speed, and no matter who jumps on it, it always goes the same speed. It doesn’t matter if it’s King David, you or your grandmother; the same pace is still set. The hedonic treadmill theory states that no matter how much our technology advances, our level of happiness and level of sadness will never change. We won’t suddenly become more emotionally stable with the iPhone 10, and, in the long run, we won’t become sadder without it.

This means that you can relate to someone from the year 50 B.C. when it comes to your emotions. This means the wisdom that the authors of the Bible wrote about transcends history itself. The practical wisdom that the Bible has relates to everyone who reads it, because our emotions are all on the same treadmill speed.

So, without further ado, here are four ways that you can start a fire with your phone,

whether you're a 6th grade girl or John the Baptist.

1. By saying whatever you want.

The first way to start a fire is to believe that you can say whatever you want, whenever you want. Thanks to the internet, we've grown bolder in the things we say. We have the ability to send out messages from behind our computer screen, and people in the great wide web will never know who said what. We can create usernames that hide who we are and say whatever we want without anyone knowing any better. We can tell the 300-pound bodybuilder how dumb he is, and never risk taking a punch to the throat.

It's a comforting idea to know that we can say whatever we want, but if you truly believe that there are no repercussions to what you say, you're kidding yourself.

As more and more people abused each other through the safety of being anonymous on the internet, authorities began developing ways to track down cyberbullies. After countless suicides and cases of depression caused by people's words online, our nation had enough and now there is an entire cyber police force dedicated to tracking down people who bully others online.

The government now has the right to track down your phone if a message gets reported as bullying, and even apps like Snapchat have to surrender people's information if the government asks for it. That's right; the pictures that you thought disappeared forever are actually locked away in a folder, just in case the authorities need to investigate your life.

The words we say out loud and the words we send off to the magical land of wifi don't ever disappear. In fact, everything you press send on is stored somewhere. Nothing on the internet truly dies, and what may have been intended as an innocent joke is actually you planting seeds of your own destruction.

Galatians 6:7 says it like this: *"Don't be deceived; God is not mocked, whatever you plant will grow someday, and you will be forced to face your words."*

Take Justine Sacco. Justine was the senior director of corporate communications at a major company. She had only 170 followers on Twitter, so she thought, "What's the harm in what I say?" As Justine was on her way to South Africa, she posted negative message after negative tweet, only to get no response.

So she kept tweeting. While she was at the airport, she tweeted: "Weird German Dude:

You're in First Class. It's 2014. Get some deodorant.' — Inner monologue as I inhale BO. Thank God for pharmaceuticals." No response. So she tweeted this while she landed in the U.K.: "Chilly — cucumber sandwiches — bad teeth. Back in London!" Still no one responded to her negative tweets. She thought she was in the clear, so she made one final tweet to her silent audience: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!"

When Justine landed 11 hours later, her phone blew up with hundreds of texts from friends and family. Turns out her tweet about AIDS became the most trending topic in the world on Twitter that day. The world knew what Justine had said, and when she landed not only did she lose her dignity in front of a worldwide audience, but she lost her job. Her family, who were from South Africa, got kicked out of the country. Justine had started a fire without ever meaning to, and she definitely harvested the destruction that her words sowed.

James 3:5 describes Justine's situation like this: *"Look how small the tongue is yet it boasts of great things. How great of a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire."*

The things we say to others and the things we post may seem like such a small thing at the time. We convince ourselves that it's just a little fire. "I'm roasting this person, but it's just a small burn." Before we know it, we've started a giant forest fire that is escaping us at every turn. Small flames are the main causes for every forest fire. Smokey Bear wasn't kidding when he said that only you can prevent forest fires. Your words are powerful, and only you can stop them from destroying lives.

2. Use **your phone as your stage.**

Another way our phones have the ability to start a fire is by allowing your phone to become your stage. Before Instagram and Snapchat, I used to have to imagine what others were thinking. But now I know what a 16-year-old in India is having for breakfast because, thanks to my phone, I am connected with the world. And because she Instagram-ed a picture of herself eating Frosted Mini Wheats.

Not only have our phones connected us to the world, but they've given us the entire world as our audience. This is both a good and a bad thing. It's a good thing because now that the world is your audience, you actually have the potential to change the world.

When natural disasters happen, like earthquakes in Nepal or a lack of clean water in Uganda, today's youth are actually among the first responders in raising awareness and

funds to help. There has never been a more compassionate generation of youth ever in the history of our world. There are more teenagers reaching out to the ends of the earth because there has never been a more connected generation before. This is a good thing.

Here's where it goes wrong. When your phone becomes your stage, and the world is your audience, what you say creates an image of how the world sees you. I'm talking about when we use that stage to give the world a front-row seat to our own negativity. I see it all the time: you had a bad day or someone made you mad, so since your phone is a microphone, you decide to vent to the entire world about your problems. It could be a simple tweet about how annoying a teacher is, a picture describing how much you hate your family, or maybe it's the elusive "vaguebooking." Oh, you don't know what vaguebooking is? Let me explain.

Vaguebooking is the act of posting a mysterious status on Facebook or Instagram that is so vague that it makes people ask: "What's wrong?" Here are some real examples that I've seen: "I can't believe she would do this to me. Is my life really worth it?" "Well, I'm ready to move..." or (my favorite), "I guess people really don't care about me..."

Vaguebooking is everywhere, and it's more destructive than you may think. It makes the world around you think that you're just trying to be negative. Not only that, but your vague statuses are destructive to the person you are writing about, and they invite others to be destructive toward that person, too. Why? Because what you are doing is creating gossip, and gossip will cause a fire that you can't tame.

Proverbs 26:22-28 is very clear about the vaguebooker and the gossip that follows:

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart; though his hatred be covered with deception, his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling. A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

The passage does not skirt around the truth about gossip and vagueness. The gossipers disguise their wicked intent, and the flatterers that run to their "aid" create even more

ruin in the person's life. The Bible is very clear about how evil gossip is. It is a disease that has taken many lives, and like gangrene infects the body, it will infect someone's self-worth. God hates gossip, so do I, and so should you.

Paul puts gossip in its place when he says this in Philippians 4:8:

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Paul is not saying you can't have a bad day. He's not saying that you can't be authentic when you talk. Paul *is* saying that the world is watching, and if the world is our audience, why not give them a pure and loving image of who you are? Yes, you are going to have bad days — Jesus promised us that — but you need to decide if what you are feeling is appropriate for the whole world to know. Sometimes it takes wisdom to vent to a trustworthy, wise friend who can put out the fires in our speech before we ever burn the people in our lives through social media.

3. Believe that everything people say is true.

Want to really start a fire in your life? Just accept everything people say as truth. I think former President Abraham Lincoln said it best: "You shouldn't believe everything you read on the internet." That statement is kind of fake, if you couldn't tell; it was actually George Washington who said it (smirk).

I'm not just talking about the dumb facts that people post. I'm talking about the *identity* that people try to make you believe in. There are people that you know at school who live a totally different life on their phone than they do in real life. It's bad enough that some kids act one way at school and another way at church, but now we have people who have different identities on Instagram?

It's pretty easy to spot the fakes in our life. We get to see these people on a daily basis, so of course we recognize when they're putting on a show.

But what about the complete strangers in our lives? I asked a couple of students recently how many of their Snapchat and Instagram friends they actually knew in real life. What they told me was astounding: most students said that they really only knew about 30 percent of the people following them, while the other 70 percent were complete strangers.

What if those strangers who you've invited into your life aren't who they say they are? Sure their profile picture shows a 14-year-old freshman and they speak emoji better than english, but if you haven't met them, how can you be sure?

I pray daily that you never meet the strangers who you follow and who follow you. I'm not some overprotective "the sky is falling" type person. My worry is fueled by stories on the news where young men and women are lured into danger by evil adults pretending to be teenagers.

These scams are what is known as catfishing, and it happens every day to innocent students who just assume that everything a stranger says must be true. It's called catfishing for a reason. They dress up their profiles like an expert fisherman covers a hook with bait. Every day, hundreds of teenagers are captured and forced into sex-slave trafficking, never to be heard from again. That's scary. And it's why you can't be too careful with this stuff.

A father gives his son this advice in Proverbs 4:23: *"Protect your heart like a guard watches his captive, because when you protect your heart you protect your life."* When we get on our phones or even talk with people, we must be vigilant and protective of our future and safety.

Paul reiterates the seriousness of the matter in 1 Peter 5:8: *"Keep your head clear; and be on the lookout. Your enemy the devil is prowling around like a lion waiting to devour your life."*

Sometimes the internet can feel like a safe place because you can access it from your home, but the Enemy will say anything to get you to drop your guard. When you believe everything is truth and everyone is who they say they are, then you may discover quickly that you've invited a devouring fire to destroy your life.

4. You can't build real relationships on your phone.

One of the most deceptive lies that set a fire in our lives is this: you can't build real relationships through your phone or social media. It's destructive because when we don't see our online relationships with people as real, we tend to not take credit for the destruction.

You have heard countless adults tell you that the friends on your phone aren't real friends. The relationships you have online aren't real. I'm here to tell you I disagree. The way you

communicate on your phone can build authentic friendships, and above all else, you can build community.

When we don't see the potential of social media to build community, we end up burning friendships before they are ever started. Aside from the catfishers mentioned earlier, the people we talk to through Instagram and Snapchat are real people, and can potentially be real friends.

Someone can send you a goofy picture on your phone, and you can laugh your heart out, right? That laughter is just as real as the other person actually being there right next to you. The phones that we carry in our pockets are the modern-day campfires where we gather together every day. It may not have face-to-face contact like seeing someone in real life does, but it can have a soul-to-soul contact.

Through the messages we send on our phones, we have the ability to create something beautiful for everyone to see. We get to tell stories that build each other up, and we get to encourage one another from thousands of miles away. We have a chance at building authentic community from right home.

We do it every day through our youth ministry Instagram account. We get messages from students who don't go here, asking prayer requests. We get students from [\[California\]](#) to [\[New York\]](#) liking our pictures and quotes. A couple of months ago, [\[use your own specific illustration here\]](#) we even had a student message us about giving his life to Christ. He accepted Christ through an Instagram account. How awesome is that!

Proverbs 18:21 tells us that, *“Life and Death are in the power of our tongue, in those who use it will reap from it.”* At first we see this just as “say nice things, and nice things will happen. Say mean things, and mean things will happen.” Although that's kind of right, you're actually wrong if you think that's what this verse is saying.

We typically read that verse as saying “life *or* death” is in the power of the tongue, but what it's actually saying is “life **AND** death” is in the power of the tongue. When we speak, we speak both life and death. When we encourage someone, we are giving life to them and helping them in their ability to press onward, and we speak death into the situation that is holding them back. In the same way, when we pray for others, we are speaking life into the kingdom of God, and we speak death into the kingdom of the Enemy.

Life and death is in the power of our words. We have the chance to build something

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amazing through our phones. But what you build is up to you. Will you set fire to the lives around you, or will you be the wise person who God has called you to be?