

Question: What are some Christian principles that can help us avoid hurting someone by unintentional misuse of instant messaging like email and texting?

Computers, the Internet and cell phones have blessed us with the technology to have instant communication with our friends, loved ones and business acquaintances. At the same time, I believe we are seeing some inherent dangers in instant messages that have not been present in other forms of communication. Any blessing can be turned into a curse if we do not take responsibility for the proper use of that blessing.

We must begin by recognizing that God has always provided essential guidelines for all forms of human communication whether oral or written. For example, intentionally deceptive communication like lying and slander is always prohibited. Paul told the Ephesians that “each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor” (Ephesians 4:25) and that you should “not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29). To the Colossians, he said: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6).

The added dimension of “instancy” brings another level of responsibility to our communications. Instant messages are often brief and not so well thought out. They tend to reflect an emotional reaction in the moment that may be regretted later. Also, it is possible that the brevity of a message may also leave too much room for misinterpretation. Once we hit “Send,” we can never fully undo the effect of what has been said. In the New Testament, James instructed us to “be quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19). The Old Testament Proverbs warn: “Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for them” (Prov. 29:20; cf. Prov. 1:6; 6:16-19), and “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov. 12:18).

In addition, email and texting lacks some important dimensions present only in face to face communication. Some messages should be delivered only in person. The eyes, facial expressions, body language and tone of voice help us interpret what is being said and to know how to respond appropriately.

When we do not have the advantage of these to help us understand one another, we need to be more thoughtful and careful with our communication. Once again the biblical proverbs give instructions on how to interpret the eyes and body language of some people (Prov. 6:12-13, 17 & Prov. 16:30).

Although emailing and text-messaging are morally neutral methods of communication, the kind of messages sent determines whether they are a blessing or a curse (Proverbs 18:21). If one recognizes the potential dangers and exercises the appropriate discretion, instant messaging can bless him. But if one carelessly sends emotionally charged, inappropriate messages or brief messages that may be seriously misunderstood, he will be cursed by instant messaging. I pray that next time any of my readers send an email or text message, they will remember these principles and thoughtfully re-read before sending any message.

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