

A Theology of Social Media
By: David Harris
5/24/2020

The God's of the Copybook Headings

Good morning everyone. It's wonderful to be able to be together in person today on this lovely May morning – I'll freely admit, I wasn't super into live streaming in an empty church, or for a few services, a mostly empty parsonage. While I'm definitely grateful that we have some great technology and have been able to use it, if there's one thing that I've learned from being in front of the camera during this strange period of our lives, it's that there's no real substitute for this – being in each other's presence. It's absolutely crucial, vital – dare I say, essential.

This particular day of the year is one of monumental significance to me and many others even here this morning. In addition to being my wife's birthday, May 24th is also the day that my best friend, Grace Bible's own Kenny Steier, went to his eternal home. I would also acknowledge that this week the church lost one of its great apologists, Ravi Zacharias. You often don't realize just how much someone impacted your life until they're no longer with you, and Ravi occupies a very special place in my own spiritual walk. When I started attending college a little over a decade ago, I was, for the first time in many instances exposed to secular attacks on my faith that I hadn't encountered before – atheism, naturalistic determinism, post-modernism – I saw many, in fact, most of my culturally Christian peers gradually abandon and reject the faith they were raised in and accept instead the tenants of the university, modern academia and the culture in general. I definitely experienced profound periods of doubt and uncertainty, but God blessed me with a good church, a Christian family, a core group of faithful friends like Kenny, and the voice of Ravi Zacharias on the way to school every morning constantly “destroying arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God,” and reminding me to “take every thought captive to obey Christ.” I thank God so much for the time spent with both of these giants of faith, and I look forward to seeing again very much.

Now, I really wasn't sure on how fit in a tip of the hat to both of these extraordinary gentlemen into a message on a biblical view of social media, but an idea came to me last week. I was combing through old messages between Kenny and I when he was going to college in Oswego and I was working in South Africa. Kenny and I both studied English literature – we would spend hours discussing Shakespeare plays, C.S. Lewis and whether America or England had a better literary tradition – truly riveting conversations. We both enjoyed poetry, especially 19th century English poets, and we would trade poems back and forth. A favorite of ours, and my favorite poet to this day is Rudyard Kipling – kids, you don't read him in school anymore, but he wrote the *Jungle Book*. I think Kipling had a way with the English language that few people have had before or since. Anyway, a few years ago, Kenny sent me a text that was something like, “David, have you read this poem?! It's like prophetic; I can't believe this was written almost 100 years ago!” The poem he sent me was Kipling's “The Gods of the Copybook Headings.” In a tribute to Kenny and Ravi, both who could quote, and in at least Kenny's case, write endless verse, I'm going to read this poem.

First, this poem is a bit dated, so I'll need to explain a little bit of the vocabulary: There are two forms of wisdom addressed in this poem, personified by “the gods of the copybook headings,” and “the gods of the marketplace,” respectively. Copybook headings were small phrases written at the top of a school composition books for young children to copy over and over to practice their form and penmanship while learning to write (and no, kids in school don't really do this anymore). These were usually in cursive, and were typically some sort of wise saying, and often a biblical proverb or phrase, like “early to bed early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise;” or “a soft answer turneth away wrath;” or “In Adam's Fall we sinned all.” So the “Gods of the Copybook Headings,” in the context of a society founded or influenced by Christianity represent wisdom and truth – truths so basic that we give them to children to copy down because they are both obvious and important. In contrast to the “gods of the copybook headings,” Kipling sets the “gods of the marketplace.” The gods of the market place could best be explained as the “gods of the here and now;” –whatever is fashionable, in vogue and promises instant or nearly

instant gratification. Also, for a bit more context wise, this poem was published in January of 1920, just after the 1st World War, and in the midst of the 3rd wave of the Spanish Flu. Additionally, I need to issue a disclaimer – I’ve changed a few words here and there to make it a bit more easy to understand. Here is the poem:

AS I PASS through my incarnations in every age and race,
I make my proper prostrations to the Gods of the Market Place.
Peering through reverent fingers I watch them flourish and fall,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings, I notice, outlast them all.

We’d just started on earth us when they met us. They showed us each in turn
That Water would certainly wet us, as Fire would certainly burn:
But we found them lacking in Uplift, Vision and Breadth of Mind,
So we left them to teach the wind while we followed the March of Mankind.

We moved as the Spirit listed. They never altered their pace,
Being neither cloud nor wind-borne like the Gods of the Market Place,
But they always caught up with our progress, and presently word would come
That a tribe had been wiped off its iceland, or the lights had gone out in Rome.

With the Hopes that our World is built on they were utterly out of touch,
They denied that the Moon was Gouda; they denied she was even Dutch;
They denied that Wishes were Horses; they denied that a Pig had Wings;
So we worshipped the Gods of the Market Who promised these beautiful things.

When the world’s foundations were forming, They promised perpetual peace.
They swore, if we gave them our weapons, that the wars of man would cease.
But when we disarmed They sold us and delivered us bound to our foe,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "Stick to the Devil you know."

On the first great granite slabs we were promised the Fuller Life
(Which started by loving our neighbour and ended by loving his wife)
Till our women had no more children and the men lost reason and faith,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "The Wages of Sin is Death."

In the dawn of the very first sunrise we were promised abundance for all,
By robbing selected Peter to pay for collective Paul;
But, though we had plenty of money, there was nothing our money could buy,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "If you don't work you die."
Then the Gods of the Market tumbled, and their smooth-tongued wizards withdrew
And the hearts of the meanest were humbled and began to believe it was true
That All is not Gold that Glitters, and Two and Two make Four
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings showed up to explain it once more.

As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of Man
There are only four things certain since Social Progress began.
That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the pig returns to her Mire,
And the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes straight on back to the Fire;

And that after this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins
When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his sins,
As surely as Water will wet us, as surely as Fire will burn,
The Gods of the Copybook Headings with terror and slaughter return!

So what does this poem mean and why did I read it? Well, being a literature junkie, I’m super excited to explain it. As I mentioned, “the gods of the copybook headings” represent truth and wisdom, you may have noticed in an obvious sense (like “water makes one wet”) and a blatantly

biblical sense (“the wages of sin is death”). The “gods of the market place,” the “here and now,” represent the promise of a perfect world where you are “paid for existing” and “no man must pay for his sins,” or more specifically Satan’s original lie that “you shall not surely die,” but “your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.” It’s been the constant habit of human society since the beginning of history to deny the truth of God’s dominion and sovereignty and accept and chase the lie that man, by denying what he knows to be true (that’s Romans 1), can create a perfect world on earth where he can become like God. That lie was there in the Garden, at the Tower of Babel, on top of Mt. Carmel, at the pinnacle of the Temple, in Judas’ mind, at the height of the Roman Empire, in the midst of countless philosophies, revolutions and movements throughout history – we see new manifestations of the lie making it harder to detect, at times but the lie remains. Thankfully, so does the truth. As we look at this subject, I’m hoping that this battle between truth and the lie will become a bit clearer.

Introduction

So, switching gears a bit, I’m going to try very hard to present a biblical examination of social media this morning. This is a subject that has been specifically requested to be addressed, and I feel honored to be able to do it. Just for the sake of clarification, while I’ll be referring specifically to social media, there’s a host of related topics and issues that fall under the same general umbrella, including but not limited to tech addiction, gaming, media manipulation, fake news, pornography, digital dating/courtship and many, many more. To highlight one of these, when I started teaching high school and started taking note of how rampant tech addiction was becoming among our young people I started to get increasingly worried about it – I hadn’t seen anything yet though, and I’m completely certain that the levels of tech addiction and their accompanying consequences have been exacerbated by the lockdowns, probably to a degree that it will take years to really understand. All of this technological change has come so fast, in fact, that I believe we may have been caught off guard in providing meaningful guidance and resources to those who either have questions about how tech and social media is effecting them, or really, more likely need help with tech addiction themselves or for their families. I’ve heard little from well known Christian churches, individuals or organizations, which means only one thing – we have to lead the way. Now, just as a disclaimer, if this feels a bit like a seminar, I apologize – I’m trying to apply biblical principles to develop a theology of social media, but I have to do quite a bit of defining first, so please bear with me, but if you want to put a finger in Mark 7, we’ll end up there eventually.

Defining Social Media

Before we do anything else, we have to define what social media is, and really, whether it’s good or bad. According to dictionary.com, social media is: “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.” I’m going to offer a sub-note to this definition that I heard from a pastor who was trying to help his flock think about technology in general: technology, social media in this case, is a form of wealth. How so? If you think of the way that carrying information has changed over history, at one time, a poor man would walk or ride an animal to deliver a message he wanted delivered. A wealthy man would have a servant do it for him. Gradually, as more sophisticated mail systems developed, you could pay someone to take your message or information – this is still true to this day. The faster you wanted the information delivered, the more you had to pay. The wealthier the individual, theoretically, the faster he could have his message delivered. What has changed to get to the point we’re at today? Most all of us have a metaphorical servant in our hands that can deliver messages nearly instantaneously. I find this definition very helpful, because while we don’t have any biblical passages on social media, we DO have lots of passages on wealth, both on its pitfalls and its blessings, its uses and misuses. With that in mind, it becomes a bit easier to identify biblical principles that relate to social media.

Social Media: Positive or Negative?

So let’s now ask the question: is social media good, or bad? Should Christians spend most of

their waking time engaging others online with the hope that some may respond to the gospel, or should Christians shun smart phones, social media and ban them at our services? A modern parallel example of technology usage is the car – I love cars. I love things with wheels. I love trucks. I really love bicycles. I love driving – there are few things I love more than road trips. I can draw you up a 100 reasons of how cars have positively impacted my life, from being able to visit long distance friends and family, to getting deep into the African bush for missions work. That being said, the current estimate for traffic fatalities last year was 38,800 by the National Safety Council[i]. Additionally, if you look at unwed pregnancy statistics, you’ll notice quite an uptick with greater car ownership throughout the 20th century – while correlation doesn’t necessarily equal causation, it’s probably safe to bet there’s a bit of a connection there. All that to say is this: technology being good or bad has to do with who’s using it – and if tech is wealth, the good can do good, more efficiently, and the evil can do evil more efficiently, but it’s about the heart of the one using it, not merely the technology itself. We see this principle stated explicitly by Christ in Mark, chapter 7, and we’ll look at that real quick now, starting in verse 14: And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” So Jesus is crystal clear – sin, evil – they come from within people. The phone didn’t make you do it, the car didn’t make you do it, the gun didn’t make you do it – you did it, you happened to be using those things to do whatever “it” was.

The Positive

That being said, there are specific blessings and pitfalls of usage in regards to social media, and we’re going to try to shed light on both of those – then we’ll apply some biblical principles to its usage. Let’s start with the positives. I should probably just state the obvious: we as a church are currently looking for as much help as we can get in the area of social media. We recognize that social media has become the dominant form of communication for many in the Hudson Valley, and the US and the World. We want to adapt to changes in technology just as many before has have adapted to using cars, planes, radio, television and the internet for the propagation of the gospel. We want to reach people where they are, because we know that God works through a multiplicity of mediums to draw his sheep to Himself. Many of you use social media applications in this way on a daily basis – some for Bible study, some just to share what God’s doing in your life. I can attest that as someone that has a lot of family on the other side of the country and many friends on the other side of the world, Facebook has been a huge help in maintaining relationships that otherwise probably would have been very difficult to. The ability to share videos, pictures and trade messages through that app has been an important part of my life since I first got one in 2008, and there are many here I know with a similar story. In mentioning Kenny, if you go to his Facebook page, it’s now sort of a memoriam to him, and I really appreciate having that perpetuation of his memory there. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook – all of these can be used for positive good. In mentioning one specifically, YouTube has opened up our ministry here in an incredible way. What started as an effort to help people who are unable to be here physically because of medical or traveling barriers has become a way to spread the messages here to a much wider audience than would have been possible otherwise (last week’s message has close to 400 YouTube views). In addition, social media has been a boon for growing and maintaining businesses, giving people, including several people in this church, a livelihood and a way to provide for their families. These are all blessings, and we should identify them as such, and give thanks to God for providing these resources to us. From the Pastor in a remote African village who’s able to get access to biblical teachings to present to his own congregation, to the grandmother who’s able to see pictures of her grandkids even though they’re separated by thousands of miles.

The Negative

So we're well acquainted with the positive – let's talk about the negative. In a sense, despite all the blessings social media can deliver, there are some particularly deadly pitfalls that are familiar to mankind, but we're now experiencing in a way we haven't before. Social media can do two extremely dangerous things simultaneously: first, it can act as a sort of self-reflective mirror where one spends hours upon hours diving into their own self-curated world of interests, lusts and self-gratifications. The pitfall here is of course, selfishness, but what's ironic is that at the very same time, that same person can be completely manipulated by carefully sorted ads, promotions and content, designed to appeal to the very same desires. What happens as a result is that the person using the app thinks that they are controlling it, while they are just yielding their control to the app, or the ones who run the app. Instead of being used as a positive mechanism for accomplishing productive good, the user essentially becomes just another ward of tech companies to drain pennies out of and expose to their worldviews. A particularly eerie example of this I hear about was a couple who didn't own a cat, but just started talking about their imaginary cat – pretty soon they started to see all sorts of ads on their social media and shopping apps for cat related products. That's a cat – what if you start talking about some social, moral or theological issue – can you rely on your social media apps to filter truth to you, or will they a) confirm you in your own faulty notions, or b) push their own views on you. For those of you who have been using some of these apps for a few years, think about how many more ads you see now compared to a few years ago; so many that are specifically tailored to your own interests and desires. A good question to ask yourself is this: as you scroll through a Facebook or Instagram feed, who is really in control? Is it still you?

Two other pitfalls involve vanity and envy. Social media has increasingly become a place where users present an image of themselves that has positive social appeal. What this often looks like is a barrage of content that paints the user in a positive light for the praise of others, or paints a picture of constant fun and enjoyment, as to make others envious. This is something especially practiced by our culture's celebrities, and then copied by the culture at large. The problem is that these pictures don't give accurate representations of the actual everyday life of those posting them – problems and difficulties are often scrubbed so as to maintain the social media image. This can swing in the opposite direction as well – users who constantly post things about how miserable they are, how terrible their life is, etc. – either way, vanity puts on a show and all are invited to attend. This can be accomplished as a form of spiritual pride as well – remember what Jesus said at the beginning of Matthew, chapter 6: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” If the purpose of social media becomes a place to demonstrate to people just how spiritual you are, it's probably not a real long hop over to the spiritual pride zone.

While this happens at all age levels, we should note that there's a massive generation gap in this area. I know from teaching and mentoring teens, that this is one of the greatest areas of struggle for many of them. The social pressure to be constantly posting, liking, commenting and keeping up appearances on social media is more exhausting than maintaining real-life relationships. I believe it's very likely that this social pressure has been at least partly instrumental in suicide becoming the second leading cause of death among Americans aged 15-24 – nearly 1/5 of all deaths in that age group^[ii]. For those of us who are not digital natives – we didn't grow up with the tech that young people today do, this struggle is a bit harder for us to comprehend.

One other pitfall I'd point to, and what I believe is by far the greatest and most destructive is that of addiction. In thinking about this word, addiction, and coming up with a biblically equivalent phrase, I think “voluntary slavery to an evil master” might be good way to describe it. Now, you might say to yourself, especially if you don't use it that much, “How can social media be an addiction?” “It's just a communication medium.” Unfortunately for the addicted, it's much more than that. What we know about the way dopamine works in the brain has increased exponentially over the last few years with more and more studies on its relation to social media usage. We know that there's a chemical effect in the part of the brain that experiences pleasure and reward

that takes place as you swipe, like and scroll – at the same time you don't need a doctorate or to publish in an academic journal to be able to identify addiction when you see it – it's everywhere, every time of day, among every human demographic. In cars, on trains, walking down the street, sitting on benches, in doctor's offices, in classrooms, in church, in your own home, perhaps even looking back at you in the mirror – social media users who couldn't stop looking at their phone, tablet or computer even if they wanted to. There are a number of sins that accompany tech addiction, but the scriptural passage that comes to mind to me is 1 Corinthians 6:12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything," or in the New American Standard, "mastered by anything." I first noticed disturbing social media addiction when I started working for a Korean school over 5 years ago. I noticed a group of somewhat rambunctious kids became not just quiet, but nearly comatose as soon as they had permission to go on their tablets, and they could stay that way for hours. As a classroom control model, there was no equal, but I had never seen anything quite like it. I learned soon after that the addiction level was far worse in South Korea than it is here – there the government has said that 1/5 of the country is at risk for tech addiction – this is a place where you can rent a high speed computer and a comfy chair for about \$1 an hour, 24 hours a day[iii]. We are not far behind, and again, there is a big generation gap. While addiction happens at all ages, what I've noticed is that the main difference between those raised in the social media age and those not, is that the younger generation is rarely bothered by the fact that they're addicted – it all seems normal because they haven't known anything else. As someone who got a smart phone three years ago, I still remember what it was like not to have one – I read more books, noticed a lot more going on around me, was much more content with quiet and perhaps above all, was less anxious. Just as a side note, while all these social media apps have the potential for addictive abuse, I'd add from what I've observed and from discussions I've had with others on this issue, Instagram seems to be particularly hard to get off of because of its singularly visual interface – it's a barrage of constant stimulation, and therefore extremely addictive. However, there are so many types of social media and different apps rise and fall by the year and the day, just identifying Instagram may become dated pretty quickly.

Applying Scripture to Social Media Usage

OK, so we've defined social media, identified some positives and negatives of using it, and now we're going to try to apply biblical principles to its usage. You'll notice that most of these principles are more about identifying scripture that helps us deal with the negative effects of using social media rather than using scripture to identify the positives – that's mainly because I think the positives sort of go without saying: we can use social media, like any other communication medium to accomplish things God has commanded us to do, like spread His Word. Additionally, ease of communication is obviously a blessing – it's the specific pitfalls of this type of communication that can be a little harder to tackle. However, implementing these principles and making some changes in our lives can lead to a far clearer and untangled purpose in our Christian lives.

Principle 1: Redeeming the Time

The First principle is one that comes from several places in scripture, but I'd like you to turn to Ephesians chapter 5, the place I believe expresses the principle best; we'll start in verse 15: Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. There's a principle that pops up several places in scripture that is effectively, keep the amount of life you have in perspective, and spend your time accordingly – you won't be here long, so make your time here count. In Ephesians we are told not only to redeem the time, but also how to redeem and what not redeeming it looks like. Wasting it is being "drunk with wine" – I might point out, is highly addictive behavior: in other words, don't give yourself over to mindlessness, instead be wise and

do these things: be thankful, worship and serve one another. We see this in a number of other places throughout scripture – especially in Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Let’s go and read the first 12 verses of Psalm 90 where this is an especially strong theme, and I’d encourage you, grab your Bible and follow along:

Psalm 90: A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You return man to dust and say, “Return, O children of man!”
For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.
You sweep them away as with a flood;
they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.
For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.
You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.
For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

The key theme and the practical application is there in verse 12: “Teach us to number our days.” That’s what we can directly apply to our usage of social media. If you’re finding yourself spending hours on apps just browsing each day – memorize this Psalm – get a picture frame and put it on your wall so it’s the first thing you see when you wake up – put it right above your head. Install an app that monitors your time on all the other apps on your phone to determine if you’re really “redeeming your time.” If you’re here or listening to this at a later date and you KNOW that this is a big problem in your life, start to make plans to deal with it – you’re fighting a very difficult battle, one even against your own biology. If this seems like a foreign concept, be aware that there are probably people in your family and in your close sphere of influence who are struggling profoundly with redeeming their time.

Principle 2: Looking for the Way of Escape

A second principle comes from 1 Corinthians 10, and we’ll start at the beginning of the chapter: For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

It's unfortunate, but there have been many throughout history whose existence seems to have been to serve as a bad example for us not to copy. By remembering their failings, as Paul does in this passage, we may be able to avoid the same ones. However, sometimes, like the Children of Israel, we fall face first into temptation when there was a clear way out that we willingly chose to ignore. That being said, I see a number of considerable temptations in the area of social media that go beyond merely letting one's time waste away. One is, as mentioned earlier, the sin of envy which leads to covetousness – this temptation takes root when you browse through Instagram or Facebook and long after what someone else is posting – maybe their material possessions, maybe just their lives in general – so much of what is posted on social media is really designed to produce envy. A closely related, and I believe significantly dangerous pitfall is the rampant use of lust to generate clicks, advertise or sell products, or just to titillate. It's more or less impossible to scroll through a social media feed without encountering things that appeal to fleshly desires and are specifically designed to cause you to stumble into one of these sins.

So, by way of social media, there may be a way of escape that your flesh is really not interested in looking into. Maybe it's putting a timer on your phone, maybe it's getting rid of certain apps that tempt you in particular ways, dare I say, maybe it's even ditching a smart phone or tablet all together, or at least at certain times of day. I can say that half-way through preparing this message, I deleted the Facebook app off my phone because I realized that when I woke up in the morning, I'd look at my emails and texts from the night before, and then immediately scroll through Facebook for awhile. Every time I did this, it was nearly impossible for me to open my Bible in the morning before starting my work day simply because I couldn't focus after scrolling for a bit. I'm in the process of recognizing that instead of just hoping that having social media apps on my phone falls into the realm of things I can handle, it's better to just take the way of escape. I'd encourage you to read this passage again later today or sometime this week, and think about what temptations you may need identify a way of escape from.

Seeking “A Desolate Place”

The final principle I'd like to note comes from the life of Christ. In Luke chapter 5 Jesus is at the beginning of his earthly ministry, and he heals a leper; it says this in Luke 5:15-16 – But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. I could spend hours noting all the times that Jesus does this – retreats to a “desolate” place. Sometimes “desolate” is translated as “wilderness,” but the Greek word, (er'-ay-mos), signifies an unpopulated place, contextually somewhere in the deserty wilderness of the Holy Land. It's fascinating that when you read the gospels with this in mind, you'll realize that Jesus is constantly “retreating” to the wilderness to pray. Why does He do this? Well, as it says here in Luke, to pray, free from the distraction of others. Unfortunately, this isn't something that we copy today as much as we probably should – we tend to spend our days, even if we live alone, in urban and suburban settings where people are always close by. Being in the wilderness, or at least an unpopulated place – maybe even just a park or a spot out in the backyard – can bring us closer to God, remove the noise that makes it so difficult to concentrate on scripture mediation and prayer, and remind us that the world is much more than just what man has created. This is not impossible, but perhaps a bit harder to do when all you see is concrete and computer screens. Now, those who know me well are probably saying, “of course YOU'RE saying this David, you love the outdoors.” Guilty as charged – being in the wilderness is one of the things I love best in life, but it's not that simple. You see, a decade ago I could go into the woods with virtually no disturbances. Now I have something in my pocket that connects me to everyone else on a constant basis, so distraction reaches me no matter where I go – I often find myself on a hike somewhere, but pulling out my phone to scroll through my texts or a social media feed! I also have found it increasingly difficult not to listen to music, audiobooks or podcasts, even when in the middle of the woods – I need some kind of constant stimulation. So it's not about merely being an “outdoorsy” person, but about learning how to turn off the noise so that we can actually talk to God, and see Him respond in His Word – and removing distractions, especially those that come with social media usage is paramount. “Seeking a desolate place” can probably look a lot of different ways – maybe it's going for a walk through the neighborhood, but leaving your

phone at home. Maybe it's going for a drive on some of our back roads with your phone or tablet turned off, and maybe even the radio off – which I'll admit, is super difficult for me. Whatever form "seeking a desolate place" takes, we have a model in the scripture from Jesus to look to.

Conclusion

Well, I realize that this was a lot to cover in one message, and I know that there are tons of issues that come along with social media that could be addressed as well, but in summarizing everything we've looked at today, I'd offer this admonition: As in Kipling's poem, we have a copybook, and need not follow the "gods of the here and now." One of the things that has concerned me the most by looking into this issue is that as access to the Bible has become so easy, at least for us here in the US, but consistent Bible reading seems to be suffering with increasing social media usage, as we have more trouble just being able to concentrate long enough to read a few chapters a day. I like the old adage, "this book will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you away from this book." If we are too distracted to knit our hearts to the Word that God's given to us, I don't see a way for us to grow, mature or have an impact on the people and culture around us. If any of the things discussed this morning have become a stumbling block to you as they have to me, then please join me in trying to make a change. If we but submit to God, He will help us. But we must want Him more than our own desires. If that's the case, then we will be the ones using social media for God's glory, not the ones giving our control over to it.

[i] <https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates>

[ii] <https://www.verywellhealth.com/top-causes-of-death-for-ages-15-24-2223960>

[iii] <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/30/746687204/south-korea-says-about-20-percent-of-its-population-is-at-risk-for-internet-addi>

A Theology of Tech:

Applying Biblical Principles to Social Media Usage

Outline

"The Gods of the Copybook Headings"

Introduction: Why Address Social Media

Defining Social Media

Social Media: Positive or Negative?

Positives of Social Media

The Negatives of Social Media

Applying Scripture to Social Media

Principle 1: Redeeming the Time

Ephesians 5

Principle 2: Looking for the Way of Escape

1 Corinthians 10

Principle 3: Seeking a “Desolate Place”

Luke 5

Conclusions

(David Harris is a licensed minister at Grace Bible Church and the son of Pastor Scott Harris)