Salt and Light Online

During the pandemic, I was honored to be asked to address a student leadership conference for a Christian school in the Philippines via Zoom. Looking over my notes, there isn't much here that doesn't apply to ALL of us with any kind of online connection.

In order to follow Jesus' call to be salt and light, and applying it to online life, I'd like to take a look at several dangers of the dark side of online life, as well as suggest ways to be wise in the use of this technology.

The Comparison Trap

I don't think anything has fueled the temptation to compare ourselves to others as much as social media. There is a wise saying that "Comparison is the thief of joy."

This is where our feelings go when we're caught in the comparison trap: to envy. To depression and anxiety.

> A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. (Proverbs 14:30)
>
> Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. (Proverbs 12:25)

The opposite of comparing is choosing contentment.

> Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)
>
> Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. (1 Timothy 6:6-8)

And one of the best ways to choose contentment is to train yourself to practice gratitude. Give thanks for what the Lord has allowed for you.

> Whatever happens, give thanks, because it is God's will in Christ Jesus that you do this. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Dangers of Social Media Apps

One of the worst is Tiktok.

A 17 year old girl wrote: "The only thing worse that happened to me besides Tiktok was my family members dying . . . . I would spend countless hours crying in my bedroom repeatedly watching Tiktok, telling myself I wasn't good enough."

Another girl told of starving herself to look like the people Tiktok decides are acceptable.

Tiktok destroys people's self-esteem. Millions of kids try to learn the dances to fit in or feel accepted.

There is a strong pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia presence, causing lots of girls to develop eating disorders because adolescents are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure.

The message on so many of the apps for girls is: If you want to be seen, heard, loved—show off your body. No one is valuing you for your heart or your mind or your passions, just your appearance. Just your body.

This is so dangerous! It's a lie that a girl's worth is in how pretty she is or how thin she is or how sexy she is.

A person's worth is set by Jesus, who was willing to pay for each one of us with His life. He says, "I made you in My image, and that makes you infinitely valuable to begin with. Then I died for you, which proves you are infinitely valuable." THAT is true worth. It's set by Jesus Himself.

Many of the apps are also dangerous because sexual predators use them to trick kids and lure them into meeting, where bad things happen. So many victims of sex trafficking are drawn in on social media.

Another way social media is dangerous is because there's where so much cyber-bullying happens.

If you see someone being bullied, ask the Lord for help and be brave. Speak up and say, "That's not okay." There is power in just one voice! And report it-to whatever authorities have to do with how you know the person, such as school, or church, or the neighborhood. Keep inviting Jesus into the situation and ask for supernatural help.

Another problem with Tiktok in particular is a different kind of danger, concerning privacy and security.

One expert said, "Anytime Amazon, major banks, and the Department of Defense ban employees from using an app for security issues, it's time for everyone to uninstall the app."

You need to know that NOTHING you put on social media is private.

Other Emotional Dangers

The more time you spend online, the greater your risk of feeling isolated and taken to a dark place emotionally. Because of the pandemic's lockdown, depression and loneliness are at an all-time high.

Scrolling your social media feeds contributes to feeling left out.

Too much social media leads to disconnection and loneliness, and feelings of social isolation. Too much social media makes us feel inadequate because of the comparison thing.

A 2018 study published in the Journal of Social and Clinical

Psychology revealed that those who limited their social media exposure to 30 minutes a day, reported that their depression lifted and their loneliness improved. Social media activist Collin Karchner, founder of the "Save the Kids" movement, kept hearing from U.S. students that they reported feeling better immediately after deleting their social media apps!

Another aspect of spending too much time online is that it can cause difficulty engaging in conversations in real life. Which of course fuels the loneliness further.

Purity

Probably the MAJOR pitfall of the Internet is pornography.

The fastest growing consumer of porn is girls 15-30. I found one statistic that 70% of guys and 50% of girls struggle with a porn problem. I think it's higher than that.

I understand that when apologist and speaker Josh McDowell offered a one-month discipleship program for Christian student leader, he learned that 100% of both guys and girls confessed to problems with porn.

Brain chemicals are released when viewing pornography and during sexual experiences. These brain chemicals are intended to bond husband and wife like emotional superglue, but when people use porn, they bond to the porn instead of an actual person.

This is a matter of spiritual warfare. The enemy of our souls is taking captive millions of Christians through pornography, then beating them up with shame and guilt.

I plead with you, install a filter or an accountability program on your phone to help you stand against this attack on your purity.

And please, don't take pictures of your bodies. And most certainly do not send any pictures of body parts to other

people!

> You were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

> The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:4)

Your body was bought by Jesus and it belongs to Him. It's not okay to give it away, even in pictures, to anyone except the person you have married.

What would being WISE look like, then?

First, recognize that this is a huge issue, especially in the Philippines. People in your country spend more time online than any other country in the world-almost 11 hours a day. You also spend more time on social media, over four hours, than any other country-twice the worldwide average.

It would be wise to choose to unplug yourselves so you can replenish your mental, emotional, and spiritual resources.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

There has to be a choice to deny ourselves and say NO to the phone as a way of saying YES to Jesus.

Think about all the ways you stay tethered to your phone so it controls you.

Get a real alarm clock and watch so you're not dependent on your phone to tell you what time it is.

At night, recharge your phone in another room so your sleep won't be disturbed by the sound and light of incoming messages and notifications.

Don’t post on social media when you’re emotional. Don’t treat social media like a diary. Then you won’t regret emotional posting that embarrasses you later.

If you’re already feeling down, don’t scroll social media. It will make you feel even worse.

To be emotionally healthy, let yourself feel your feelings instead of distracting yourself by scrolling.

Put your phone down and be 100% mindful of what’s happening in your life at that moment.

The blue light from screens decreases your melatonin levels, which leads to sleep problems. Turn off your screen an hour before bed to help yourself sleep better.

Love One Another

Before you post anything, ask:

- Is it true?
- Is it helpful?
- Is it kind?
- Will it cause drama?
- Am I posting this for the right reason?
- Would my grandmother want to see this?
- Is it mine to share?
- Would I say this or share this in real life?
- Does this glorify God?

Can you see how passing your post through the filter of these insightful questions would be loving?

The Big Picture

There are two verses that strike me as especially appropriate to this issue:

> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather,

> in humility value others above yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)
>
> So then, whether you eat or drink OR WHATEVER YOU DO, do it all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

If that is the question we ask: "Will this bring glory to God?" we will find ourselves being loving, kind, respectful Christ-followers who are bringing salt and light into the dark and corrupt world of the internet.

And we will earn the Lord's accolade: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/salt-and-light-online/ on May 17, 2022.

The 3 As: Attention, Affection and Affirmation

Wise people have observed that we all have legitimate, God-given needs for "the 3 As": attention, affection and affirmation. God intends for children to receive them from their parents first, laying a foundation of a healthy sense of self, then from their peers.

The Attention need is met by being there, listening, watching, engaging and interacting. Ever hear the famous line, "Daddy, watch me!"? One wise father told another whose daughter kept clamoring for him to look at her as she played in the back yard, "If you don't watch her now, soon she'll look for another guy to give her the attention she wants from YOU."

The Affection need is met both physically and verbally. We all need hugs and safe touch. And most boys need the rough-housing

kind of physical affection from their dads that says, “You belong in the world of males.” We need to hear the verbal affection of “I love you,” terms of endearment, and other forms of communicating love.

The Affirmation need is met by validating people’s feelings, efforts, skills and gifting. Noticing and commenting when they do things right—or even try. It communicates, “I am for you” and “I believe in you.”

Jesus received the Three As at His baptism. His Father and the Spirit showed up [attention], and the Father pronounced, “This is My beloved Son [affection] in whom I am well pleased [affirmation]” (Matthew 3:17).

Much unhealthy, dysfunctional behavior is driven by trying to get these three needs met, usually without realizing what is driving us. Unfortunately, it’s getting harder than ever to get these needs met because of two things proliferating in our culture.

First, families seem to be growing more fractured and more dysfunctional than ever before. Fatherlessness is at epidemic stage. The National Fatherhood Initiative cites the U.S. Census Bureau’s statistic that one out of three American children live in homes without their biological father.{1} Parents in the home are often stressed, overwhelmed, and so self-focused, whether on selfishness or mere survival, that many children feel like they are on their own. Plus, the people God intends to fill their children’s emotional tanks with attention, affection and affirmation—parents—are often scrambling to try to get their OWN tanks filled. So there is a sense of disconnection at home.

Second, smartphone technology has moved into the hands—and heads—of the majority of Americans. Over half of adults own smartphones, and a recent report from the Pew Research Center revealed that 78% of young people ages 12-17 now have cell

phones, and nearly half of those are smartphones.{2} That means continual connection to the internet. That means billions of text messages daily, which have virtually replaced phone calls for many people, especially youth.{3} The camera on most people's cell phone means that many people view life's experiences, from wedding processions to grade school concerts to street fights, through a 3-to-4-inch screen held away from the body.

In short, we're doing life through a screen.

And that screen is an additional layer of disconnection between people. Technology has created a superficial degree of counterfeit connection, and relationships are suffering. People think they're connected to other people through their phones, but in reality they're connected to their phones and a counterfeit kind of "life."

God knew what He was doing when He stressed the importance of staying in connection, continually engaging with each other: I count 41 "one anothers" in scripture.{4} He knew what He was doing when He instructed believers to make sure and keep meeting together to encourage one another (Heb. 10:24).

God put needs for the Three A's inside us, and He intends for us to meet them through connection to other people. Please, hug somebody. Tell them they're important and valuable. Be there for them.

And you might want to put down your phone.

Notes

1. www.fatherhood.org/media/consequences-of-father-absence-statistics Accessed 09/10/13.
2. www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2013/More-youth-use-smartphones-as-route-to-Web.aspx Accessed 09/10/13.

3. www.businessinsider.com/chart-of-the-day-number-of-texts-sent-2013-3 Accessed 09/10/13.
4. www.mecf.net/one_anothers.html Accessed 09/10/13.

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