**The Professor and Social Media**
**Faculty Commons September 2018 Meeting**

Let me start with a note about our theme this year: The Better Professor. What does “better” mean? We can get down in the “weeds” to talk about the specific elements of “better” in various areas of our jobs, but instead I would like us to soar up high and contemplate on three “whatever you do” verses:

*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. – I Cor. 10:31*

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. – Col. 3:17*

*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. – Col. 3:23-24*

We want to be better professors not for our own glory, but for God’s. We want His glory to increase, His name to be praised. Although we have human bosses, we want to ultimately work for our ultimate boss, the Lord.

And so today we want to look at the use of social media as it pertains to these purposes. My specific goal for today is to look at Scripture that speaks to the appropriate use of social media. You might reply by saying, woah, there. There was no social media 30 years ago, let alone 2000! Although I would agree that our modern technology of course did not exist back then, I don’t think things have changed quite as much as you might think. And I also believe that nothing is so new, so novel in our culture that Scripture has *nothing* to say to it.

I would argue that the authors of the New Testament letters, for example, used the social media of their day. Paul, for example, wrote many letters to believers he had contact with. Some of these were to very specific people, such as the books of I and II Timothy and Titus, which were written to, well, Timothy and Titus. You could argue this was the ancient version of a text message, on a really, really, really, slow connection. It was a two-way communication, because we know that, based on the content of the letters, Timothy and Titus were also communicating with Paul (although we don’t have these communications).

But then you have other letters written to groups, such as Ephesians, which was written to the believers in the city of Ephesus. I guess this is more like a groupme. Maybe not exactly like this, because it’s not clear that if one of the Ephesus believers wrote to Paul that all of the other Ephesus believers would see it – but maybe they would, as they seemed to be a quite close-knit group (unlike the Corinthians) – we know this because Paul speaks glowingly of the love they have for one another (Eph. 1:15). Some of the letters are even more broad, delivered to regions, such as Galatia.

And then you have other letters written quite broadly; the book of James, for example, is written “to the twelve tribes in the dispersion,” which is basically to Jewish believers everywhere. I would see this more like a blog post or even a youtube video. Although blogs and youtube videos are typically open to the entire world, in practice (unless they are extremely popular), the only people who see them are those who are already connected in some way to the people or the topic at hand. My point is that whether we are consuming or producing social media content, it is not *that* different from much more ancient forms of communication.

Now, if Paul or James were alive today, I fully believe that they would be using modern social media for the purposes of advancing the gospel and maturing/encouraging the church. I have several friends who have previously served as missionaries who now work in a more apostolic kind of role, equipping and encouraging other missionaries and believers in foreign countries. Because of social media, they can video chat with them regularly, despite being across the world from them. This is better than phone conversations, because a lot of communication is lost when you cannot see the other person, and vastly better than letter-writing, due to the ability to have two-way real-time communication. Letters still have their place, but imagine how Paul or James would have taken advantage of this technology! Really what I am saying is that technology has given us more options and made the world smaller, allowing us to “almost” be there in person instantaneously, but there is nothing truly new here.

I also would add that, as good as these technologies have become, there is still a vast difference between seeing and talking to someone on a screen and being there in person. My “apostolic” friends all still make multiple long trips each year to visit people in person around the world because they know how great this difference really is. Paul in his letters frequently talks about how he longs to be with the members of the various churches in person. We too need to understand the superiority of direct human companionship and fellowship and choose to make time for it to happen. As Paul writes in Hebrews,

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. – Hebrews 10:24-25*

In the remainder of my talk, I am going to focus on potential pitfalls and dangers of social media. I am doing this because Scripture really does have relevant warnings on multiple fronts. But don’t conclude from this that I am anti-social media. Like most technologies, it has potential for great evil but also great good. Social media can be quite powerful, both on an individual and a societal level, and like all powerful things, it should be used carefully and wisely.

So my first warning would be in the area of time management. Social media applications are constantly being made to be more and more compelling, or to use another word, addictive. The social media companies are literally making money by how long you use their products each day, and they spend lots of money on research to increase your use of their products. They don’t care about how productive you are at work, or how much quality time you spend at home with your family, or whether you have quiet times. It’s a harsh analogy, but they are not unlike drug dealers who give out some early doses of their drugs for free in order to get you hooked.

One verse that speaks to this is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

*All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. – I Cor. 6:12*

There are no words emphasized in the original Greek, but I like to emphasize the word “not.” To not be enslaved means to watch your behavior carefully. If excessive social media use is already a problem for you, maybe set a timer on your use, and when the alarm goes off, you stop no matter what you are in the middle of. There are many other ways to limit your time, but the point is to use one of them. Understand that the battle – if you are battling in this area – is really a battle over enslavement. Much like how the Israelites in the Old Testament often fought their enemies to avoid becoming enslaved by their attackers, think of your battle over the use of your time as just as dire, just as critical. Enslavement really is the danger here!

I thought about including here recent data on how much time on average people spend on social media today, but the results are so bad that I don’t want to tell you, because I don’t want you to compare to these averages and thereby conclude that you are doing fine. You can look them up yourself if you really want to know. Instead, I will give you one more verse, this one from Ephesians:

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. – Eph. 5:15-16*

When we get to heaven, the books will be opened and our lives reviewed. Do you really want God to see that you literally spent 12 solid day-and-night years of your life on social media? Is this walking wisely or foolishly?

Another warning I would like to point out is in the tendency of viewing social media to tempt us to covet. Coveting is so significant to God that the commandment to not do it is one of the “big ten,” one of the Ten Commandments. It is mentioned both in Exodus and Deuteronomy; here is the Deuteronomy version:

*And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. – Deut. 5:21*

How does social media get us to covet? We can become jealous of what others have, for example, the wonderful vacations our friends (or strangers) go on. And this is only one of the more minor dangers. A recent Time magazine article put it this way, that divorce lawyers *love* Facebook, because “business” has never been better! An ever-increasing percentage of affairs get their start in social media. It’s all too easy to search for and find an old flame or fall for someone new. When you read volumes of material by someone, or watch hours upon hours of their videos, although it is not the same as spending all that personal time with them, it still can have the same effect on your heart. Just as it is extremely unwise for a married man to spend tons of personal time alone with a woman who is not his wife, it is equally unwise to do so virtually, whether through real-time or through recordings.

Even animals can fall for 2D images! There was a story last year about a penguin in a Japanese zoo that fell for a cardboard printout of a penguin-like anime character. Penguins normally find a mate for life, but when moved to new surroundings, this penguin’s wife left him for a younger, more handsome (I guess) penguin. The poor husband became depressed, until the cardboard arrived. He would get as close to “her” as he could, and soon began performing penguin mating rituals for her! Sadly, the cardboard did not reciprocate, and soon after the poor penguin died. I’m not making this up; this really happened! (And yes, I know it is true because I read it on the Internet!)

Discontentment and even depression can be outcomes of coveting. We need to learn to be selective in what we watch or read, understanding that what might be fine for one person is not fine for us. We also need to get in the habit of *evaluating* what we have watched or read after the fact, not asking “was it good” but instead, “was it good for me”. If not, we should not continue to partake of that social media producer going forward.

Let’s talk a little about *producing* social media content. I like what Groothius writes in his article *Understanding Social Media*; he says that social media tends to foster “the overexposure of the underdeveloped self.” What he means is that people exemplify the tenets of Proverbs 12:23. I really like the New Living Translation of this verse:

*The wise don't make a show of their knowledge, but fools broadcast their foolishness. – Prov. 12:23*

Most of you know I switched to radically different diet after having heart problems last November, a diet that is vegan (with additional restrictions). This diet has been researched by cardiologists and has solid science behind it. But I have also wandered around on YouTube seeing what others say about the diet, as well as looking for good recipes, and from there I have wandered (as YouTube leads you) into veganism videos in general. This has really been my first excursion into watching videos of “regular” people, and I have to say that until then I had no idea how true Proverbs 12:23 really is. I’m not going to give you details here, but let’s just say that it’s been a real education, and not the one I intended. Fools really do broadcast their foolishness!

We should be careful who we listen to, as Psalm 1 instructs:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. – Psalm 1:1-3*

But even more, we should be careful not to *be* fools. We may be smart in our chosen fields of study, but I guarantee you that we are all foolish in at least some other areas. We need to be careful not to broadcast our foolishness!

Another warning has to do with our ultimate purpose in this life. Why are we here? It’s not just to make a decent living, have some fun with what we earn, and die having lived a full life, is it? That may be the goal of many in our culture, but as Christians, we need to remember that first and foremost we are Christ’s ambassadors. Our purpose is to glorify God through how we live our lives, including leading and drawing others to Christ. This is a 24-7 kind of job. Once people know we are Christian, we are on display all the time. When we act foolishly online – or in any public area of life – we communicate something false about God and His kingdom. When Paul calls himself a “slave” of Christ, he is getting at this idea in another way. We are here to serve our king and to expand the kingdom. The whole idea of “me” time is not really a biblical concept. I’m not saying we can never relax or go on vacation, etc., but I am saying that we are always on display as Christ’s workmanship. Although we are to have *faith* like that of little children, our *behavior* is supposed to be mature. There are so many verses that speak to these ideas, but if I had to choose one, it would be this:

*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. – 2 Cor. 5:20a*

I’m not saying we need to blast out our Christianity in every piece of social media we produce, but I do think we need to evaluate everything we produce before we upload it in *light* of the fact that we are Christ’s ambassadors.

Another warning is in the area of simply being distracted. This applies especially to our phones. We need to be careful not to communicate the message that the people we are with physically are not as important as those we are with online. I include the following verse because it is one of my favorite verses:

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. – Rom. 12:15*

The point is to enter *in* to what someone is communicating, what they are feeling. This can be challenging enough to do when you *are* paying attention, but it is impossible if your mind is elsewhere, on your phone.

There is much more we could talk about, such as the propensity of social media to promote gossip, or the temptation to present photos online that are narcissistic or even immodest, or the improper use of social media to “vent,” to complain, or the tendency for so many discussions to degenerate into flame wars. But instead I want finish today by talking about the dangers associated with producing social media intended for one audience that is misused by another.

In this I am reminded of Jesus’ warning in the Sermon on the Mount:

*Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. – Matt. 7:6*

Remember that anything you produce could be picked up by your students and used to potentially argue that you are biased against them or that you are intolerant, just foolish, etc. This has happened to others at other universities. We need to remember that we now live in a culture that by and large is opposed to Christianity. This does not mean that we should not engage the culture, but that we should do so wisely. I would simply ask you to remember that there is no way to “un”-produce any social media content you create. Be careful, but I also pray for us Acts 4:29 –

*And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness. – Acts 4:29*